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OR, THE ROUNDHEAD'S REPRISAL.

A Romance of the Rio Grande
Ranches.

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AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "OKLAHOMA NICK,"
"THE NAMELESS SPORT," "A ROYAL
FLUSH," "DAN BROWN, OF
DENVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A QUEER BRACE OF MESSENGERS.

"JOKE or no joke, business is business, and
orders are orders, pard. All you've got to do is
shut your eyes and let her went."

"But—durn it all, Trick Purkett."

"What's the use, Sonora?" drawled the fox-faced rascal, knocking the ashes from his pipe, and springing lightly to his feet from the bed of dead grass in which both had been lying at ease, so far as physical comfort was concerned. "You do the part assigned you, and let old Roundhead do the howling. And if his throat isn't sore before that sun comes back again, it's copper-lined and fire-proof."

"IF ANYBODY ASKS WHO DESIGNED THAT CRAFT, TELL HIM RATTLEPATE ROB
WAR THE ARKITECK."

A chuckle followed the words, and even that dim twilight was sufficient to reveal more than malice in the weazen face of Trick Purkett as it turned toward the western horizon, where the bright hues of sunset were turning into the shades of night.

Only for a moment, then the fellow turned his foxy eyes toward the north, seemingly in search of a certain object, though he muttered, barely above his breath:

"It's too early for that, but it'll come—it'll come on time, and we want to be all ready."

Sonora Sam gave a grunt of undisguised disgust.

"I'd be a heap more ready ef I only knowed what was afore me."

"Duty, Samuel," chuckled Purkett, turning quickly toward his grumbling mate, rubbing his skinny yet muscular hands in evil glee. "A wild gallop through the night—a pair of spurs as red and hot as though Satan himself was scratching your back at every jump! A race for life, if not for honor, Samuel! Think of Molly—sweet Molly—divine Molly—precious Molly Fits, Samuel! Molly of the blue eyes and golden hair—red gold, Samuel! Molly of—"

"Durn Molly an' you too, Trick Purkett!" growled the gaunt rascal, as he flung himself once more upon the dry grass of the past seasob. "Ef it's sech a mighty secret, button up your lips in airnest. I'd heap ruther hear a coyote singin' then you—sech a chune, anyway!"

"Now, you're hot, pard; and that's needless. Now you're wishing you might crawl up my back and taste the two ears o'me; and that'd be cannibalism, Samuel. It might be even worse—for you, pard!—if I wasn't in such a glorious good humor this blessed evening! An evening to be marked with a big, red stone, Samuel! An evening—Eh?"

"Only wonderin' whar you got your drunk from, pard," grimly grinned Sonora Sam. "'Tain't whisky, fer I'd smelt o' yer breath time an' over again senee the fit tuck ye. 'Tain't—"

"Call it blood, Samuel, and let it go at that," chuckled Purkett, one hand drawing a small flask from his bosom as he squatted down in front of his mate.

Sonora Sam started up, to sink back again with a grunt of disgust, as Purkett uncorked the bottle and poured a thick, half-coagulated substance out in his hollowed palm.

A dab of the hand smeared his temples with the stuff, permitting it to trickle slowly down his thin cheeks.

"It is blood, Samuel! And who's to say it came from bovine veins? Not John Cromwell—not the old Roundhead. Ten to one he'll be too hot for the saddle to even notice it, when I gasp out the terrible tidings—when I beg him to—ha! ha! ha!"

He burst into a harsh laugh that shook his wiry frame from top to toe. Broken sentences came from his lips, but they told Sonora Sam nothing more than he had already learned; much less than could satisfy his burning curiosity.

As suddenly as the fit had overtaken him, Purkett recovered from this hilarious attack, staring keenly into the face of his thoroughly disgusted comrade. Dim though the light was just then, "between dog and wolf," he presented anything but a pleasant picture.

"Been making a fool o'myself, have I, pard?" he muttered, with a movement of one hand across his face, which blurred the blood-streaks, until his countenance was rendered even more repulsive than before.

"Ef it wasn't that natur'd saved you the trouble, heap o' while ago, Purkett!" grinned the gaunt fellow, maliciously.

"Better now than later, pard," and springing to his feet, Purkett uttered a shrill whistle between his fingers, at which a horse rose from the still taller grass a few rods down the hollow, coming at a trot toward its master.

"Good boy!" muttered Purkett, patting the creature on the nose as it touched his shoulders. "If you are as prompt to answer all calls upon you, pard, this night will make us both famous—or infamous!"

"Who set you up as boss? Time enough when I fizzle out, I reckon!" sulkily muttered Sonora, rising to his feet with a shake of his broad shoulders. "Anyway, I know 'nough not to start afore the sign is ripe! Whar's the light? Len' me the loan o' them mighty eyes o' yours for a bit, cain't ye? Mine's no good. I'm no good. They ain't nobody no good but you—in your mind!"

Purkett laughed shortly, his eyes glowing maliciously.

"Talk about woman and her curiosity! But you'll grow wiser as you begin to count the frosty streaks on your pow, Samuel. You'll know that it's heap more easy to execute than to scheme. You'll know that the happy man is he who has only to plod along the trail blazed for him by another brain. You'll know—"

"That I've got the craziest fool out o' jail fer a pard! An' I'm knowin' to that a'ready!" snarled the disgusted fellow, striding away in the direction from whence Purkett's horse had come.

That worthy laughed to himself as he unslung

a full canteen from the saddle, unscrewing the top but barely moistening his lips with the contents.

"If it was whisky, now! Or if I would talk a blue streak by way of explanation, even if half I uttered was a lie! Either way pard would be happy. But—I always did like to tease a rattler before mashing its head!"

With the aid of a doubled bunch of grass, Purkett began to dampen certain portions of his horse's body with water from the canteen, after which, with a piece of soap, he quickly raised a white lather, stiff and lasting.

Sonora Sam came back with another horse, watching the curious actions of his partner with undisguised scorn on face and in voice.

"All durn foolery, pard, an' you know it!" he muttered.

"All the difference between an artist and a bungler, Samuel," with a low laugh as he cocked his head on one side to view the effect. "It's just such foolery that gives one man shoulder-straps, and the lack of it that keeps another drudging all his life as camp cook or the like!"

"Waal, I ain't goin' to make no durn monkey-show out o' my own self, jest fer my own laughin'—I ain't!"

"There isn't so much need, in your case, pard, though Aus. McFarland totes a mighty keen eye in his head, too! But with me—well, I want just as many chances as I can pick up when I tackle the old Roundhead! And he's too saddle-wise not to know that a horse can't cover fifteen long miles at a jump, tail-on-end, without frothing up a bit."

"Ef he's so mighty sharp, he'll smell the soap stink an' know it hain't clean sweat, too quick! Then whar be ye?" with a grin that showed this thought was not altogether disagreeable, partners though they were.

"Matching my tongue against his wits, be sure," laughed Purkett, gazing keenly toward the north once more. "Time, Samuel! It's coming! I can smell the smoke of sacrifice already! I can—you know what you're to do, pard?" his tones growing cold and terse as he gathered the reins and touched foot to stirrup.

"Ef I don't, it's the boss I'll answer to fer it, anyway; not you, Trick Purkett!" growled Sam, lifting himself into the saddle with a sluggish, reluctant movement. "I ain't knowin' to them shoulder-straps you was singin' 'bout—I ain't!"

If he heard, the foxy rascal paid no heed to that grumble. With a cat-like motion he gained his saddle, laughing as he watched a faint reddish sheen marking the northern horizon.

"Fire! fire and ruin and desolation, pard! Murder and rapine—blood and tears and wails of agony, Samuel! To horse! Redden your spurs and carry the news on the wings of the wind, Sonora! The River Raiders have swept down on Club Ranch. Javelina Juan is freezing fast to Molly Fits—Molly of the red-gold hair and sky-blue eyes. Molly, our little tin angel on ten wheels. Ha! ha! ha!"

With screeching laughter rising high above the thump-thump-ing of his good horse's hoofs, Trick Purkett dashed away over the grass-grown prairie, heading southeast, his eyes seeming to reflect back the dull red light which was steadily growing and spreading in the north.

Just as rapidly, but in silence save for the rapid trampling of hoofs, Sonora Sam sped away to the southwest.

"Wake up, Old Roundhead! Rouse thee, John Cromwell o' the Rump!" screeched the weazen rascal as he sped swiftly through the night, swaying to and fro in his saddle through pure delight at his diabolic thoughts. "Spur and saddle, neighbors! Hot lead and cold steel for the audacious scoundrels who'd dare disturb the rest of Molly Fits! And give one rousing cheer for the honest lad who risked his precious life to break through those serried ranks to seek aid for his idolized mistress! Whose honest face is bathed in blood from wounds received while running the gauntlet! Ha! ha! ha!"

Viciously his spurs dug into the ribs of his good horse, sending him ahead at break-neck speed. And even as his shrill, eldritch laugh rung out, Trick Purkett bent forward and rubbed his cake of soap along the dampened hide, increasing the white lather.

"Foolery, pard? Don't I know how keen those eyes are! Don't I know that Old Roundhead would string me up before his own door if he even suspected how I'm playin' him roots? Genius, pard!"

"Fifteen miles as the crow flies! Fifteen miles, up hill and down hollow! Fifteen miles, without pause to catch breath! Fifteen miles, with aid in front and worse than death behind! What horse wouldn't sweat and lather after all that?"

Where the reins rubbed; down along the double cinch; wherever hair-cloth or leather rubbed and chafed, Trick Purkett freshened the lather until the growing heat of the animal's body caused it to drop off in frothy flakes.

As he madly raced over the prairie, that red light in the north spread and crept higher and higher.

"You're mad to hang out such a glorious beacon, Javelina!" he laughed as he watched the red light, still racing on at top speed. "Even

if gallant heroes were not spurring red for aid, that light would bring wild and woolly investigators, and it's a long stretch back to your den, my daring king of the wild hogs!"

Still viciously spurring, but cramping the throat of his snorting steed with an iron hand on the reins, thickening its breath with every stride, Trick Purkett raced on until the buildings forming the "Rump Ranch" came into plain view. Still on, until a sharp challenge rung out on the night air:

"Halt, stranger! an' look whar ye'r goin' to."

CHAPTER II.

THE ROUNDHEAD AND HIS FAMILY.

TRICK PURKETT wrenched up his panting steed, then seemed to fall forward on its neck through pure exhaustion, an inarticulate sound escaping his lips.

"Men's plenty the way you come from, I reckon, pardner, or you wouldn't be so hot to ride 'em down," grimly added the tall cowboy in his path, pistol in hand as he stepped forward, peering through the gloom as though trying to recognize the reckless horseman. "What's bu'sted loose with you, anyway?"

"Water—I'm all choked up!" gasped Purkett, huskily, lifting his head with a painful effort, supporting himself by his hands on the drooping neck of his foam-whitened steed.

It seemed an expiring effort, for, with a hollow groan, he gave a lurch and tumbled from the saddle to the ground, before the startled cowboy could spring to his aid.

It was the perfection of acting, and instantly the vague suspicions of the cowboy died away. He gave a loud shout for assistance, as he knelt beside the fallen man, lifting his head to a knee.

"What is it—blood, by thunder!" as he noticed those ghastly streaks across the rascal's face.

"I'm—all choked—up!" gasped Purkett, sending a shiver through his limp figure. "Help—bloody murder—"

Again the cowboy shouted for help, but the alarm was already given.

One man came running from the stables hard by, and a bright flash of light shot out through the opened door of the larger building to their left, the ranch proper. A broad-shouldered man with uncovered head and armed hands came hurrying outside, while the shapes of women showed just behind him, though they paused on the threshold.

"What's up, Brooks?" came a stern, deep voice.

The cowboy gently lowered Purkett's head to the ground and rose to his feet, his right hand lifting in a mechanical salute as he said:

"Mischief, I'm afraid, boss. Here's a stranger—"

John Cromwell brushed past him, bending over the prostrate figure, just as Purkett again gasped forth:

"Murder—help 'em fer—I'm chokin'—"

A dark frown flashed into that stern, hard face, but it was caused by recognition, not of the broken speech but the tones of that voice.

"I know you, Trick Purkett. What devil's work are you up to now?" he harshly demanded, a vise-like grip fastening on the fellow's arm.

That grip, or it might be that stern suspicion, caused Purkett to conquer his seeming faintness sufficient to gasp:

"Fire—murder! Look—all red—red as blood!"

He struggled to a sitting posture, pointing to the north, where the sky line was reddened, the glow spreading fan-shaped high into the heavens.

A sharp ejaculation broke from the lips of the rancher as his eyes followed that gesture, for until that instant not one save Purkett had noticed that ruddy evidence of crime or accident.

"It's the Shamrock Ranch!" exclaimed John Cromwell, his voice now full of strong excitement. "You're from ther? What has happened? Curse you, rascal!" with fierce emphasis, again gripping the fellow by an arm until his muscular fingers seemed to meet through the flesh. "If there's aught going wrong, why don't you out with it at once?"

"The Raiders—Javelina Juan!" in tones so choked and husky that even those anxiously strained ears could with difficulty interpret his meaning. "I'm chokin'—whisky—water!"

"Look to the fellow, Brooks. Hold him under the pump if you can't loosen his tongue any other way. Have him ready to talk when I've got the boys ready for a ride over to Fitzpatrick's place."

Cromwell turned back toward the house where his wife and daughter still stood in the door, pale and anxious, frightened by they hardly knew what. He paid no attention to their hurried queries, but caught up a long, polished horn from where it hung against the wall, putting it to his lips and sending forth a sharp series of notes which floated for miles through the night air.

It was the method of summoning in hot haste all of the men employed on "Rump Ranch."

"There's trouble of some sort over at the Shamrock," he hastened to explain to his women-folk, when this first step in the path of duty was taken. "That rascal Purkett brought word,

but he's too bad scared or hurt to speak out clearly."

"And Molly—she is not—"

But John Cromwell was hastening to the end of the house for another look in the direction of that red light, and if he heard he did not heed his child's half-spoken fear.

In silence the mother and daughter followed him, their faces turning still paler as they, too, saw that tell-tale glow, and drew from it an evil deduction. Their dear friends were in peril, but they dared not give vent to their fears, just then, in the shadow of that stern face.

Always grave, often austere, John Cromwell was seemingly in one of his darkest moods just now. Until that face should lighten, until that gloomy spell be broken, neither wife nor daughter dared address him.

Looking upon him now, broad-shouldered, heavily-built, plain-garbed, with hair cropped short and face smooth shorn; that face so massive, so stern, so free from change, so impassive even in the midst of strong excitement; and with his name to aid the fancy, too; it is easy to divine why the title of "Roundhead" should be attached to this man by the cavalier-like ranchers of the country.

Harry Brooks came hurrying up to the spot where the Roundhead and his family stood watching the distant fire, speaking briskly as he touched his hat to the women:

"I reckon the critter kin talk out now, boss. 'Pears like he was hit hard, an' then the ride—"

"What has he to say?"

"I didn't wait to see, boss, thinkin' mebbe you'd ruther hev it at fu'st hand," was the prompt response.

"He's an evil knave, or his face belies him," frowned Cromwell, turning away. "But I'll question him. You see to the horses, Brooks. If there's mischief afoot, we've got to play against it as best we can."

The cowboy was turning away to obey, when Faith Cromwell touched his arm with a trembling hand, whispering hurriedly:

"What is it? Not—nothing dangerous—no evil threatening dear Molly Fitzpatrick?"

"I'm afeard they must be, ma'am," reluctantly replied the man, his stern features softening as he looked down into that pale yet lovely face. "It's a man from the Club Ranch, an' he's been shot in the head or face while tryin' to fetch us word. An'—waal," with a fleeting frown, "as you'll hear it anyway, I mought as well out with it: he said somethin' about Havileen Hwahn, an'—"

"That merciless demon!" gasped Mrs. Cromwell, shuddering.

"Mebbe he's off his nut—that is, ma'am, we're hopin' it ain't nigh so bad as that, you know," stammered Brooks, beating a hasty retreat.

John Cromwell hastened to where Purkett was leaning against the half-barrel which stood under the spout of the pump. The fellow was just binding a dampened handkerchief about his bloody head and temples, and he staggered to his feet, seemingly unconscious of the Roundhead's approach, moving toward his horse as he gasped:

"Hurry—for the love o' Heaven! Help, fer the boss! Help, for the poor leetle lady! They'll kill 'em all ef—ah!"

With a choking groan he reeled, sinking to the ground with hands clasped tightly to his temples as though his brain was bursting with pain. And though he made a feeble effort as John Cromwell came up, to arise, it was only to sink back again. It was simply the perfection of acting, and almost unconsciously to himself, the rancher's voice softened as he began questioning the seemingly sorely-wounded fellow.

"What has happened, Purkett? What is wrong at Fitzpatrick's?"

"He's bin raided—the Wild Hog! They come up jest afore dusk, an' was all 'round the place afore anybody 'spicioned trouble!"

Again his voice choked, and Cromwell, stifling his impatience as best he could, called to his wife to fetch a flask of whisky to him.

She quickly obeyed, and with her came Faith, eager to learn all, yet fearing the worst for her dear and almost only girl friend, fair Molly Fitzpatrick. Purkett grasped the bottle eagerly, yet with an apologetic murmur about his hard ride and sore hurt. He half emptied the receptacle at a gulp, and seemed to draw a fresh lease of life from the ardent liquor.

In a stronger, clearer speech he told his story. Told how Gerald Fitzpatrick managed to rally most of his men, and beat back the raiders sufficiently to permit himself and those surviving to enter and close the ranch. Told how he, Purkett, volunteered to run the gantlet in hopes of bringing help before the raiders could overpower the defenders.

"I got through—don't ax me how, for I'll never tell ye, boss," with a short, grim laugh as one hand went up to his bandaged head. "They was a mighty heap o'shootin', an' I done my sheer of it. An' Sonora got through, I do reckon, too, from the way them imps split up an' made two runnin' gangs o' the lot. Mebbe they ketched him, an' mebbe they didn't. It was all I knowned how to keep straight head this way—an' it feelin' like my brain was leakin' out at every jump my critter made!"

All through this John Cromwell was watching the fellow keenly, his old suspicions only reluctantly giving way, for his opinions were very stubborn when once fairly formed. He frowned a bit as a second messenger was so abruptly brought on the scene, for at first Purkett had given the impression that he alone had volunteered to run the gantlet.

"Where did he go—this Sonora, as you call him?"

"The good Lord knows! He started fer the Pea Jay Ranch."

The Roundhead turned away with a frown wrinkling his brows. He had especial cause for disliking even the mention of that place, so called after the initials of its dashing young owner, Paul Joyce; and that frown was not lightened as Faith timidly touched his arm.

"You will go, father? Think of poor Molly! Think what her fate may be if that merciless demon captures her! You will save her—save them all, dear father?"

"I'll do what one man can, of course. I only wish there were more hands to take with me. For, of course, I can't leave you and mother unguarded here, so nearly in the track of those demons, should they be beaten off!"

"They would not dare stop to fight, so soon after that, John," ventured Mrs. Cromwell, with a shivering glance toward that blood-red beacon in the north. "We will close the house, and—you taught us both how to shoot, husband!"

Without a word of reply, the rancher shook off their hands, turning to where his cowboys were gathering in response to the horn signal.

They were not many in number, for this was not the busy season of the year for cattle-raisers, and though the "Rump Ranch" was an extensive one for that time and place, eight men besides himself were quite sufficient to carry on the business. Few enough, however, in this new emergency! Few enough to act as guard upon the home ranch as well as to ride to the rescue; for Javelina Juan was hardly one to venture so far from the Rio Grande without an ample force at his back.

"The critters are ready, boss," said Harry Brooks, advancing to meet the Roundhead, his handsome face flushed with the light of anticipated battle. "An' the boys is more'n ready—they're jest red-hot to git in a lick at them cussed cattle-lifters! An' me, too, boss!"

A grave smile flitted across the rancher's face at this frank addition, but he did not see fit to act upon it.

"You and Joe McCord will stay here to look after things, Brooks. Sorry to disappoint your longing for a fight, but you ought to feel proud of my trust in you. I leave my all in your care, remember."

He had scarce time to note the curiously mingling expressions on the face of the honest cowboy, when the trampling of hoofs interrupted them, and he turned to see Trick Purkett in the saddle.

"What now?" he frowned. "You're on the sick-list, and—"

"I'm goin' back to do what I kin fer the boss an' Miss Molly, an' I'm goin' right now—lone ef you ain't comin', boss!"

CHAPTER III.

RATTLEPATE.

"It's your say, pardner! To be or not to be; a dry camp, in mercy to what was once a mighty good horse, or a stick-to-it through the dark until we git thar with both feet!"

"What do you think about it, Randall?"

"After you is manners, boss," with a light laugh. "I'm just playing guide, for wages, you don't wan't to forget; and if I pride myself on any one thing mors'n another, it's sticking to rules and regulations through thick and thin. You say, and I'll do."

There was no immediate response to this half-laughing, half-serious speech. Knight Latchford gazed downward, but it hardly needed this to show him how persistently his animal favored its injured leg. It had done so for a couple of miles back; ever since breaking through the hidden burrow of a badger; and there was no longer room for doubting the seriousness of the injury thus received. The beast was little better than a cripple now, and was growing momently worse.

The sun had disappeared from sight, though the western horizon was still red as blood. Twilight was of brief duration there on the prairie, and there would be quite an interval of darkness before the rising of the moon.

"We can't make Fitzpatrick's to-night, you say?" slowly uttered Latchford, glancing into the frank, comely face of his guide.

"Worse luck—no!"

"You seem mighty anxious to get there, though, Rattleplate?" with a half-smile in his tones and those keen gray eyes.

"Why wouldn't I, pard? I've run up ag'in many a worse baiting-place than that same Club Ranch, in my time."

"Has he two places, this Jerry Fits, as I've heard you call him?"

"Only the one, pardner, and there's plenty I know would feel tempted to call him a hog if he wanted another to back the old Shamrock. I only wish I was half as well fixed! Perhaps—"

Something like a sigh cut short that sentence, and again the ghost of a smile flickered in and out of the strong, grave face at his shoulder. But Knight Latchford made no comment, and the two men rode slowly afield, the injured animal limping painfully.

"You see, pardner," added Rattleplate Rob, turning sideways in his saddle and critically watching the crippled horse as he spoke: "We're curious critters, out here, and it isn't everybody's names that hits our fancy. Jerry Fits—Gerald Fitzpatrick, you want to know! Well, Jerry Fits is an Irishman, though he shows it more by his tastes than his looks. And so, when he came to make himself out a brand, he naturally picked out the shamrock, and so it is registered. But, at his first round-up, that name was changed. It was pure luck, I reckon, but the very first calf that was branded caught it right in the center of a square white spot, and that made the three leaves look too mighty like an ace of clubs for the boys to miss it. And so—you see?"

Knight Latchford nodded, though it was plain to be seen that he felt far less interested in the matter than did his glib-tongued guide. He was watching his horse, seemingly calculating its chance for completing their journey that evening.

"How far is it to the Shamrock Ranch from here?"

"A dozen long miles, anyway," came the reluctant response.

"Too many to walk, let alone riding this poor brute!" and Knight Latchford drew rein. "Unless there is a nearer shelter, we'll have to try that dry camp of yours, Randall, I reckon."

Rattleplate Rob also alighted, giving his horse free rein, knowing full well that it would not betray his confidence. He bent over and picked up the injured foot, examining it by the sense of touch rather than of sight, for the twilight was rapidly deepening into night.

This was a needless precaution, for his former investigations had told him all there was to be discovered: a badly wrenched ankle, which would lame the poor brute for many a long day to come.

"We're worse off than they are," added Latchford, with a grim laugh as the animal, as soon as Rattleplate lowered its foot, began cropping the grass beneath its nose. "Not only a dry, but a hungry camp! Well, they say many a man has dug his grave with his teeth!"

"He can't make the Club Ranch, that's flat," muttered Rob Randall, with a quick glance around them.

"Can he make any other to-night?"

"With a bit of doctoring I reckon he might," slowly.

Knight Latchford cast another sharp glance into the darkly handsome face, his former suspicions strengthened by that curious tone. What meant this almost sulky reluctance? What reasons had this hired guide for objecting, even negatively, to lead him to another ranch than the Shamrock?

He knew very little of this young man, and had, in truth, cared less up to the present time, although their intercourse had been pleasant enough; even confidential to a certain degree. All he had sought for was a competent guide from the city to the range, and Rattleplate Rob o' the Range, as this dashing young fellow was introduced to him, came highly recommended in that respect.

"What he don't know about the cattle country ain't hardly worth learning, stranger!"

Rattleplate Rob glanced up in time to catch that keen gaze, and even in the growing gloom a flush was visible on his manly face. With a stiff salute that had something of the soldier in it, he said:

"It's for you to say, sir. I think I can bandage the horse's ankle so that he can carry you to either the Rump Ranch or the Pea Jay, just as you prefer, without seriously injuring the animal."

"Which place is the nearest?"

"There is a little difference as to that. We are about midway between the two."

"And the distance?"

"Call it five miles."

"Which one would you prefer?"

"That's for you to say not me. I'm your guide, not your adviser."

"The Pea Jay Ranch; isn't that where the fellow you call Paul Joyce hangs out when he's at home?"

Rob nodded assent, still maintaining that stiff, unnatural—for him—demeanor. He could not so readily forget the suspicion which he had read in those keen gray eyes.

"All right. Do what you can for the beast, and I'll think it over in my mind," quietly added Latchford, lighting a cigar and sinking to the ground in an easy position.

The young man quickly set to work, cutting a strip from the blanket which was secured in a roll behind his saddle. Dampening this with whisky from a pocket-flask, he proceeded to tightly bandage the injured limb, fastening it in place with thongs of buckskin, also taken from his saddle. It was a neat job, quickly performed, and Knight Latchford expressed as much when it was finished.

Rattleplate Rob.

He led the horse forward a few rods, critically watching its movements. These seemed much more free, and his hopes rose rapidly.

"Not that I couldn't lay out all night, if I had to, mind you," he laughed as he swung himself into the saddle once more. "But I'm getting too old for any needless exposure. And now—what's the matter with you, pardner? If I didn't know better, I'd swear you'd been taking a starch bath all at once!"

"Tell me what you were thinking of, back yonder a bit ago, and I'll answer that question," was the blunt retort.

"Simply wondering what objections you had for turning in at the Rump Ranch. Of course I know why you steer clear of the other place. I feel the same way, though my reasons may be deeper-seated than yours."

"Your eyes talked heap plainer than that!"

"Then they belied me. Come, man! blow that cloud out of your face, or I'll have to think you're repenting telling me so much about this Paul Joyce!"

There was a moment of hesitation, then Rattleplate Rob grasped the proffered hand, smiling after his usual fashion.

"There's my hand, and my heart goes with it!" he exclaimed, heartily. "I did think—but let it pass!"

"That my nature was so perverted by my profession that I couldn't help looking on you as a possible quarry?" laughed Latchford, lightly.

"Something of that sort. Mind you, pardner; I don't like your business for a cent. Until I met you, I looked on all detectives as little better than human bloodhounds, whose highest aim in life was to pull down a helpless victim; if a guilty one, all right; but a victim, all the same, even if it had to be an innocent one!"

"You're not the first man I've met with the same ideas, Randall; but we're not all such black sheep. Some of us are even honest, conscientious men, strange to say!"

Rattleplate Rob joined in that light laugh, and apparently had fully regained his usual spirits.

"But about this Rump Ranch—queer title!"

"And a queer fellow runs it, too," nodded Randall, his face suddenly clouding, almost with a frown. "John Cromwell—the Roundhead, he is called, and the name sticks tighter to him than that by which he was christened! Paul Joyce stuck it on him, but I reckon he's often wished since that his tongue had been blistered too bad to shape the title!"

"And from Roundhead comes Rump Ranch; that's of course," laughed Latchford, covertly watching his young guide. "A queer fellow, you say? And his family—if he has one—do they partake of his queerness?"

"Wait a bit and judge for yourself, pardner. It ain't the biggest family in the range, but—well, I'll ask your opinion after you've seen Miss Faith!"

"Ah-hal sits the wind in that quarter?" laughed Latchford.

"She's a little white angel on wheels—is Faith Cromwell," was the earnest response, his big black eyes fearlessly meeting that quizzical scrutiny. "She's good as they ever make 'em these days, and any man might be proud of gaining even a smile from her sweet face. But you're way off in your guessing, pardner! She ain't for the likes o' me. I've got to have a bit more devil in mine—a little more pepper and spice and the like, you understand?"

"I understand what you are saying—yes."

"It's straight as a string, pardner," was the serious reply. "She is too much of an angel on earth for me to look at with those make o' eyes. And that's just why I'm willing to help you out in this ugly job of yours. She's a heap too good for the likes o' him, and—"

"You mean Paul Joyce?" sharply interjected Latchford.

"Worse luck—yes!" with a deepening frown.

But before he could explain his meaning further, the horse he bestrode suddenly shied to one side, pricking its ears sharply, snorting as though catching an evil scent.

Many a man would have been unseated by that quick leap, but Rattleplate Rob seemed one with his saddle, his seat remaining unshaken.

"Nothing worse than a prowling coyote, I reckon!" laughed Latchford, as a melancholy howl came floating across the prairie.

"I ain't so sure—steady, lad!" and Randall patted the arching neck of his good steed as he gently touched his flanks with his spurs. "I never knew the fellow to even notice a wolf, unless it came too nigh his heels; and then it was good-by—*Look out, pard!*"

Sharp and angry rose his warning cry, for his keen eyes distinguished coming peril through the surrounding gloom; but quick to act as he was, there was no time to fairly slip through that cunning snare.

Warned by the snort and start of the sagacious steed, those snake-like shapes lying in the grass sprung to their feet with sharp cries, almost surrounding the two horsemen. And as they closed swiftly in, they brought into play weapons far more to be dreaded than cold steel or hot lead.

Before he could realize that peril was impending, Knight Latchford felt a cold, snaky coil

settling over his person, and with arms tightly pinioned to his sides, he was dragged rudely from the saddle.

The more experienced guide fared no better than his employer. Despite his effort to dodge, it seemed as though full half a dozen nooses closed around him, tearing him from the saddle, but, even while falling, his revolvers came out and began to speak with marvelous rapidity!

CHAPTER IV. THE RIVER RAIDER.

BUT it was only the instinctive effort of a brave man defending his life, and as those terrible coils buried him violently to the hard ground, the weapons were knocked out of his hands, and for a brief space Rattleplate Rob knew nothing more.

Knight Latchford was handled a little more considerately, perhaps because he made no real effort to resist, owing to the complete surprise. But even he was tumbled from his saddle and stretched upon the ground, held helpless by two lassoes cast from opposite sides, with anything but tender care. And before either man could make an effort to gain his feet, they were pounced upon and both gagged and bound hand and foot.

One who appeared to be in authority uttered a few sharp commands, and the two captives were dragged together, raised to a sitting position, propped thus by being placed back to back with an extra lasso drawn tightly around their persons. And thus it was that Rattleplate Rob found himself when his briefly-obscured senses cleared up.

The chief was standing before him with arms folded, an evil smile curling his thin lips, visible by the starlight which fell fairly over his face.

A picturesque figure, taken as a whole.

Little if any above the average height, his figure was lithe and graceful, apparently gifted with no slight degree of physical powers. His chest was round and full, his limbs trim and sinewy, all well displayed by the garb he wore with grace and ease.

This was the national costume of a Mexican ranchero, laced and ruffled, braided and ornamented, bearing a modest fortune in gold coins and bullion.

The face, too, was not unhandsome, after a certain tigerish fashion, though it bore the marks of age in more than the deep lines between the black, glittering eyes and at the corners of the thin-lipped, merciless mouth. In years gone by, before evil passions were given such free license, no doubt he had been more than good-looking. But now, bold, reckless, thoughtless, as he was credited with being, the young guide felt a cold shiver creep over his frame as he met that mocking gaze.

"It is you, Rattleplate?" uttered the chief, showing his white teeth in a smile that was fairly wolfish in its triumph.

His English was pure enough, though a critical listener might have detected a foreign accent.

But Rob Randall was not gazing into face or eyes. He was staring at the curious emblems which the chief wore on breast as well as hat; golden representations of the wild peccary, now gleaming in the starlight; and they told him who the chief was—that pitiless scourge of the Rio Grande, Javelina Juan!

With the mocking laugh the chief stooped, and with flashing blade cut the thongs holding the gags in place, stepping back to add:

"Is it so, Roberto? Is it necessary that I summon one of my wild pigs to grunt forth an introduction? Thou knowest me, Roberto?"

"For the blackest, foulest, meanest devil out of hell!"

There was no discounting that. Rattleplate though he might be, Rob Randall was terribly in earnest when he uttered those words.

It was in perfect keeping with his wide reputation for recklessness, and seemed suicidal, under the circumstances. He was so helplessly in the power of this outlaw. And people said that Juan took far greater pleasure in slaying than in eating or drinking.

Yet he must have been in an unusually merciful mood on this occasion, for, instead of flying into a rage, he laughed softly, and smiled down into that hatred-darkened countenance.

Rattleplate Rob cast a swift glance about them, trying to sum up the outlaw force. He made out a full dozen at least, deep as was the gloom, and he doubted not that many others were within easy call. Reckless as Javelina Juan was reputed, he was not likely to venture so far north of the big river without ample backing.

"And you brought—how many score?—hogs along to help you capture two lone riders?" he sneered, with real or assumed contempt.

Javelina Juan shook his head laughingly as he retorted:

"Not for that, Roberto, though I sorely regret giving your natural pride a downfall. It was not to seek you that I came so far north. I did not even recognize you as my men called out your coming. I am after larger, more valuable game than you this evening, Roberto!"

"You fiend!" and the prisoner struggled des-

perately to burst his bonds, the effort causing both captives to fall helplessly upon their sides.

"You're after—"

"Steady, man," panted Latchford, in his excitement lifting his voice far higher than he intended. "Choke it down! Don't let 'em see you know or suspect—"

Javelina Juan lifted a hand by way of signal, and the lasso tightened, cutting their words short, as they were once more lifted to a sitting position.

Rob was silent, though the pressure slackened as soon as they were fairly settled as before. It may be that a gleam of reason came to him in response to that hasty warning. But, if so, it bade fair to be too late for service.

There was no smile upon the face of the Wild Hog now as he bent over his captives, no merry music in his tones as he muttered:

"We were fools, both of us, Rattleplate! Mayhap I was the worst, but you will have to suffer the most—worse luck for you!" and Juan turned on his heel and moved away through the gloom, leaving the two prisoners guarded only by the man whose hands grasped the other end of the lasso whose noose encircled them both.

"A nasty fix, and getting no better mighty fast," muttered Latchford. "That's an unruly member of yours, Rattleplate! Pity you didn't bite off the end when you took that tumble—not enough to wholly disable your powers of speech, but sufficient to make it too sore for free wagging!"

"Odds is the difference, pard. You don't know the Wild Hog if you think different! He'd wipe us out, just through the pure love of killing, and I've had a bit o' satisfaction in telling him how much I love and respect him, anyway!"

"What are they jabbering about, over yonder?" asked Latchford.

Rattleplate shrugged his shoulders as best he could, under his multiplicity of bonds.

"It don't need ears to tell that! They're settling how best to send us across the last divide! That, of course!"

"Mighty comforting, you are!" growled Latchford, relapsing into silence with grim sullenness painted on his strong face.

Rattleplate said nothing. For once in his life he was content to let his tongue lay idle. But his brain was busy enough.

No need for guessing as to what business the Wild Hog had on hand when his surroundings were taken into consideration. How many audacious exploits had fastened upon him the title of River Raider. Beyond a doubt he was aiming one of his terrible blows; but at which ranch?

The Rump Ranch was the nearest, barely a couple of miles away. And its herds were well worth such a trip, could they be safely conveyed to the further side of the Rio Grande. Yet this was further from the "sacred soil" of Mexico than Juan had ever before ventured on such a raid, and the chances would be against his making a safe retreat with such cumbersome booty as cattle.

In sullen silence the captives listened to the consultation now going on a few yards away, and as the speakers grew more interested, they caught sufficient to know that their fate was being discussed, with the odds all against them.

Only Javelina Juan maintained silence, listening in turn to each of his men. Almost without exception they spoke in favor of death.

Then a clear, mellow voice came more distinctly to their ears, and Rattleplate Rob listened intently.

"Why waste more blood than is necessary?" this speaker was saying. "To keep them from proclaiming the authors of this little raid? Are we ashamed of our work? Do we ever try to hide our light under a bushel? Then why does our noble chief bear on his person the image of the *javelina*? Why does he ever leave his symbol behind him, to tell all the world whose hand has dealt the heavy blow?"

"Can these two poor devils tell more than the whole world is fully welcome to know on the morrow? No! And hence I cast my vote for mercy! Let them be left bound beyond the power of freeing themselves, and hidden in the hollow over yonder. If they are found before the coyotes pick their bones—let it be so!"

Still Juan made no response, delivered no decision. As the tall man ceased speaking, the chief turned back to where the two men sat in bonds, and the last speaker followed after to add:

"It is little to ask, Javelina, but I do ask it, as a personal favor. Spare the lives of these two poor devils, since they cannot seriously injure us, nor at all endanger our plans."

In his earnestness he seemed unconscious of their close proximity to the captives, and took no pains to smother his voice. But Rattleplate Rob was watching him with eyes that fairly glowed, as though backed by living fire, his bearing strained, his brain busy at work.

Javelina gave an impatient twist of his shoulders as those lips came closer to his ear, and a strange event took place.

The pleader wore a full flowing beard of jetty blackness. Not even the most suspicious would have doubted its perfect naturalness, but now

Rattleplate Rob.

it caught on the golden image of the peccary, and that impatient shrug fairly tore the jetty disguise from its wearer's face!

Rattleplate Rob caught his breath sharply as he saw that handsome face for a single instant, then his eyes sunk and his head drooped until his chin touched his breast. For a brief space his heart fairly ceased its action, for right well he knew that if the masked man even suspected this discovery, his death was assured!

Through his brows he saw the man start and hastily turn away, his hands deftly replacing the disguise. Saw him turn again, glaring suspiciously in that direction, then stride swiftly forward, rudely pushing the younger prisoner's head back until their eyes fairly met.

It was a keen test, but Randall proved equal to it. There was nothing but angry scorn in his face or voice as he growled:

"Get it over with, you infernal skunks! I don't want to live, after being caught in such hoggish company!"

With a shrug of the shoulders the fellow withdrew, Javelina bearing him company. They stood apart from the rest, apparently still discussing the question of life or death, though none of their words floated to the ears of those most intimately concerned, though they fairly held their breath in listening.

In the end the black-bearded man prevailed, for Juan once more approached them, this time with a number of his followers.

"It is time for our parting, Roberto," he said, in his old mocking tone and manner. "It is sad, so sad! But—let us live in hopes of another and more lasting meeting! If the coyotes do not scent you out too soon! May all the saints guard you, Roberto!"

At a signal from the chief, the lasso which bound them together was cast off. Strong hands picked them up and bore them away through the night, crossing a gentle swell and descending into a comparatively deep hollow, where they were rudely cast down amidst the tall, rank grass, which completely shut off their view of surrounding objects.

They listened until the sound of footsteps died away, when Knight Latchford muttered with a long breath of intense relief:

"Thank the Lord! they've left us our lives, any way!"

But, Rattleplate did not appear to join in with his gratitude, judging from his words:

"Ain't for what? To starve to death, unless the hungry wolves scent us out before death comes in that shape!"

CHAPTER V.

RIDING WITH RED SPURS.

EVEN as those words passed his lips, Trick Purkett straightened up in the saddle, looking more like a brave, honest man than John Cromwell had thought possible.

"'Tain't o' my own likin' that I rid here to ax help o' you," he said, fairly meeting that keen gaze, his own eyes glittering brightly. "I come at the word o' my boss. Go to Rump Ranch, he says. They's men thar that won't wait fer two axin's will they straddle critter fer to fetch help to a gal-woman. They's men thar—but I begin to think the boss was clean off his base."

"Ef he wasn't, you sart'ainly be, critter!" sharply muttered Brooks.

He might have said more, but the Roundhead lifted a hand to the contrary, and the indignant cowboy drew back a little.

Trick Purkett apparently failed to see this gesture. His figure was losing its almost rigid perpendicular a little, and he slowly passed one hand across his brows as though to brush away the mist which was stealing over his eyes or his brain. And his tones were less hard and steady than before:

"That's what Jerry Fits said when I got ready fer to make a break away. Git to Rump Ranch, he said, an' that's all you need keer fer. The Roundhead'll do what's left, he says. Jes' let him know that—Look yender, will ye?" his voice rising almost to a screech as he suddenly turned half-around in the saddle to point a quivering finger at the ruddy glow in the north.

His wiry figure swayed unsteadily in the saddle, and apparently it was only a mechanical grip on the pommel that kept him from toppling to the ground as he huskily panted:

"It's fire—an' she's thar in the middle of it! Save her, ef you're anythin' like a man! Save Miss Molly, or—cuss ye fer black-hearted cowards!" in a spasm of fury, as he gathered up the reins and dashed his armed heels into the quivering flanks of his steed. "Hunt your holes an' lie in fear an' tremblin', thinkin' only o' your ow' mangy bides! I'll go alone to tell 'em why I hain't fetched back the help they begged an' prayed fer!"

His tortured steed would have plunged forward under that fierce roweling, but the iron hand of the Roundhead caught its head, holding it helpless as he sternly cried:

"Catch him, Brooks! The poor devil is crazed by his hurts. Gently, man! I never thought to say it, but there's true manhood in the rascal, after all!"

Trick Purkett faintly resisted, but did not overdo the matter. He was playing a delicate as well as bold game, and he played it to perfe-

tion. And he knew that his point was as good as won. After that bit of honest frenzy, not even John Cromwell could doubt his truth!

"Easy, my good fellow," the Roundhead added, as Harry Brooks lowered that foxy villain to the ground. "We'll do all we can to aid your master and mistress; but it is a long ride when precious lives are hanging in the balance, and the warning may have come too late!"

"Hurry—save Miss Molly!" faintly murmured the decoy.

Something like a fainting-fit seemed to come over him at this, and his eyes closed with a faint shiver. Not a muscle changed as he caught the sympathetic sigh which Mrs. Cromwell gave as she uttered:

"Poor fellow! how he must have suffered! And they—poor Molly Fits! Help her, husband—hurry to the rescue, and take every able man with you! Faith and I can hold the house, even if danger comes this way. And—we'll take this poor body inside; he needs care such as we can best give him!"

"I'll do what I can, of course, mother," was the quiet response, as the Roundhead glanced quickly over the horses which were being brought forth for the race against time. "But say no more about remaining here alone, for I'll none of it. Brooks and McCord will stay, and they can look to this poor fellow's hurts."

"But—you will be so few—so very few!" murmured the wife, with a timid movement as though she longed to clasp his neck with her loving arms.

"Plenty for all that's likely to be before us, mother," said John Cromwell, intercepting her hands, holding them in his strong, firm grasp as he moved with her toward the house. "There'll be little if any fighting. The villains will think only of the shortest road back to their dens, when once they know the country is rousing. They'll never stop to exchange a blow."

There was more said, Faith uniting with her mother in urging John Cromwell to take all of the men with him, but their words were wasted. His will, once formed, could not be shaken.

"We'll be safe enough, even if the imps try to show fight. We can dodge them if needs be. But you—if they should retreat this way, they might try to get even, and with only two women to resist them—Brooks and McCord must stay!"

There was nothing more to be said after that, given in such hard, determined tones. And the two women silently received and returned the hasty kisses which the rancher paused to bestow before hastening out to where the animals were held in waiting for the road.

Not a little to his surprise, John Cromwell saw Trick Purkett once more seated in the saddle as though resolved on making one of the rescuing party.

"He would hev it that way, boss," muttered Harry Brooks, half in disgust, half in admiration such as men of his class ever feel for another of undoubted pluck. "I didn't like to tie the critter, but that's all that could 'a' held him back. Ef you say the word—"

The Roundhead paused to gaze keenly into the face of the decoy, half hidden as it was by the handkerchief enveloping his head and temples. Trick Purkett forced a sickly grin as he returned that gaze, and his voice seemed stronger as he muttered:

"I'm goin' 'long, boss! I couldn't stop back while they's sech—that's Miss Molly in trouble, ye know, I'm goin'—ef it kills me!"

As though fearing an effort to restrain him, the fellow touched his horse with the spur and trotted off, chin on shoulder, in readiness to make a race of it rather than be foiled in his purpose.

The Roundhead frowned darkly, but shook his head in answer to the inquiring look of the tall cowboy.

"There's no time to fool longer with the obstinate fellow. Let him go! If he falls out by the way—well, there's better and more precious lives in peril than his!"

John Cromwell mounted his waiting steed, hurriedly adding:

"Keep your eyes open, Brooks, and barricade the house at the first hint of danger. Mind—to you and McCord I am trusting all I hold dear on earth!"

"No harm shall come nigh them while we draw breath, boss!" was the grave, earnest response.

No more was said. They each understood the other, and with a parting wave of the hand to wife and daughter who stood in the door to receive it, the Roundhead gave his good horse free rein, dashing swiftly away over the prairie, heading direct for that blood-red beacon, now rising higher and spreading wider than ever.

Ahead of him galloped Trick Purkett, crouching in his saddle as though already he was paying the penalty of his obstinacy. After him raced the six cowboys, armed and eager for a brush with the enemy.

As they cleared the buildings and outlying corrals about the Rump Ranch, no longer seeing other light than the ruddy beacon ahead, this seemed to increase in brilliancy. And despite the miles which lay between the two ranches, as

he turned his head to glance backward, John Cromwell could distinctly recognize each face of his sturdy fellows as they followed hard upon his heels. That red glare lighted up their stern, hard-set faces, and he knew that man could not wish for better backing in a hot brush with deadly enemies.

The night was still, the only breeze being that born of their swift advance. The weather was just cool enough to be pleasant riding, and both riders and their mounts appeared to feel its influence.

Only for that terrible beacon! Only for the knowledge of what lay at the end of that fierce, headlong gallop!

For the first mile or two, the Roundhead kept a tight rein on his impatient steed, for he knew that the old adage meant much in a race of that length. Good as were their animals, fifteen miles is no trifile over a prairie course, and it is ever the first flight that tries a racer the hardest. Then he gradually slackened his grip, and smiled grimly as he saw Trick Purkett slowly coming back to them.

Naturally enough, since he bestrode the same animal on which, as all save himself believed, he had raced all the way from Shamrock Ranch since the setting of the sun.

But that smile changed to an expression of anxious sympathy as he saw how unsteady the fellow had grown; how he shook and swayed in the saddle. And as he passed him by, Cromwell cried:

"Better give over, my man! You're not fit for another such ride!"

"I'll git thar—with both feet!" harshly gasped the rascal, with a vicious thrust of his spurs, causing his tortured beast to fling up its head with a snort of pain.

The cowboys gave a little cheer in recognition of this sample of "clear grit," but despite his seeming resolution, Trick Purkett soon fell to the rear of them all. And then, as though realizing his helplessness, he hoarsely panted:

"Tell 'em I done my level best, boys. Tell Miss Molly—"

His voice seemed to choke, and as the Roundhead glanced back, he saw Purkett swaying in the saddle, then drop heavily to the ground. He wrenched up his horse, tersely uttering as his men came dashing up:

"Keep on. I'll catch you up."

He rode back and dismounted by the side of Trick Purkett, who looked up with a ghastly grin as he gasped:

"Thought I could, but I couldn't. Tell 'em—strike one lick fer—fer me, boss."

Cromwell thrust a flask of whisky into his trembling hand, uttered a few words of cheering, bidding him remount as soon as able and ride back to the ranch. He dared waste no more time, but mounted and raced at top speed to regain his position in front of his gallant men.

"Thar's more afoot then us, boss!" uttered one of the cowboys as he dashed alongside. "Reckon it's the Pea Jays!"

The Roundhead made no response, his face cold and stern, his massive jaws grimly set, his heavy brows drawing down over his glowing eyes. He had made the discovery for himself, and had reached the same conclusion.

Dimly visible, far away to their left, but plainly riding toward the same point of the compass, was a little clump of horsemen. Beyond a doubt it was a rescuing party from the ranch owned by Paul Joyce, roused out by Sonora Sam.

Though his men seemed secretly glad of this promising addition to their scanty force, not so the Roundhead. Even though he had known the end of that headlong ride must bring them into a hand-to-hand conflict with Javelina Juan and his whole force of Wild Hogs, he could not welcome aught which held connection with Paul Joyce!

Not only because that wild, reckless, laughter-loving young cavalier of the range had jestingly dubbed him "The Roundhead," and his home the "Rump Ranch," titles which bade fair to stick through all time; he could have forgiven that, knowing as he did how common such whimsical freaks were in that region; and Paul Joyce had frankly, almost meekly begged his pardon for the act, not once but many times; but the luckless young rancher had committed a still graver crime.

He had fallen in love with fair Faith Cromwell, and had openly avowed his hopes of some day winning her for his bride.

"When the lamb mates with the hungry wolf!" John Cromwell had harshly uttered. "When the dove makes its nest with the vulture! Then my child may mate with you, Paul Joyce; but never until that day!"

"That is your answer, Mr. Cromwell; now I'll wait for hers," the pale, stern-faced suitor had flashed back. "If she tells me the same, when we stand face to face, heart to heart, out from the shadows of your grim face, then I'll accept it as final. But until then I'll hope on."

After this, little marvel that the stern Roundhead grew still sterner as he saw that force from the Pea Jay Ranch slowly but steadily drawing nearer as they both raced toward that ruddy beacon.

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

A MEETING was inevitable, though it need not necessarily take place much if any before gaining their common destination. The Rump Ranch lay to the southeast, the Pea Jay Ranch to the southwest of the Shamrock, and each one about fifteen miles away. Thus the two forces were drawing slowly toward each other, while still keeping a direct course for the fire.

If anything, those from the Pea Jay were in advance, and this fact, it is possible, had something to do with their earlier meeting. The Roundhead would not veer a foot from his direct course, but the other party apparently were more friendly, for they turned slightly to their right, sending forth a ringing cheer as they came near enough to distinguish forms if not faces.

The Roundhead frowned blackly as one of his men ventured to answer, but he said nothing, keeping his gaze riveted on the ruddy light in advance, touching his steed with the spur as though still hoping to avoid an actual union with the others. But if so, he was disappointed.

By the time another mile was passed, the leader of the Pea Jay force gained his side, and in a harsh tone cried out:

"Glad to see you, Mr. Cromwell!"

The Roundhead turned with a start, for this was not the voice he anticipated. Nor could he recognize the object of his aversion among the party following the grim, gaunt foreman of the Pea Jay.

Austin McFarland seemed to read his thoughts, for he quickly said:

"The boss is not here—worse luck, if there's any fighting to be done the night, neighbor! Next to you, sir, I'd feel safest with Paul Joyce at my shoulder in a brush with the Wild Hogs!"

"Yet he's quick enough to talk when—"

"And quick to act, ye mind, Mr. Cromwell!" flashed the sturdy Scot, who knew right well how matters stood between the twain. "It's far enough in the lead o' us all the boss would have been, only for his bad luck in being far away this week and more past! There's little love or liking on your side, I'm knowing, but—"

"Talking will not help matters any, Mr. McFarland," curtly interposed the Roundhead. "And we have something of more importance on hand this night. No offense meant, of course!"

"And none taken, neighbor," laughed the canny Scot, as they dashed on side by side. "But—I'm fearing we're too late for aught else than congratulating our friend of the Shamrock! If there was any fighting going on we'd surely catch the sounds from here!"

"And the light is dying down! Pray Heaven we may not be too late for aught but to strike a blow for vengeance!" gloomily muttered the Roundhead, through his clinched teeth.

Long before this the keen-eyed cowboys had noted the fact that the ruddy glare was lessening in extent as in brilliancy, and had the mood of their leader been different, some of them would have spoken to him on the subject. Kind and generous enough, after his cold, stern fashion, John Cromwell was hardly a subject for confidential talk, even when in his less dark moods. But this night, and particularly since discovering the coming of the party from the Pea Jay Ranch, not even the most reckless among them all cared to approach him.

"And yet—victorious or defeated and beaten off, we'd surely ought to have seen or heard something of the Wild Hogs," added McFarland, his shaggy brows drawing together. "If Fitzpatrick hadn't sent one of his own men to ask for help I'd begin to think it a joke."

"Where is he—this messenger?"

"Back at the Pea Jay with a crippled ankle. His horse dropped dead with him, and he crawled the rest of the way on his hands and knees. He begged to come—to be bound in the saddle, if no other way—but of course I would not hear to that."

The Roundhead said no more, but touched his panting horse sharply with the spur. Less than another mile would carry them to the top of a swell in the ground from whence they could catch their first glimpse of the Shamrock Ranch and its surroundings. Until then—

And yet there was a strange, uneasy doubt growing up in his busy brain which he could neither dispel nor fully comprehend.

Why had they heard no shots? Such sounds travel far on a night as calm and clear as this. True, there would be no firing after a capture, and none following a repulse. Jerry Fits had no force sufficient for a chase, even of demoralized foemen. And if the Wild Hogs had been defeated, why had nothing been seen of the fugitives? Surely they would have taken the most direct route for safety, which could only be found on the further side of the big river? And even if they had ridden in a close clump, they could scarcely have passed between the two parties of rescuers without being detected.

Could it be all a trick? Was it only a cunning scheme to draw him away from his loved ones? Was it—pshaw! and he frowned at the wild fancy, recalling the condition of Trick Purkett. And Sonora Sam—Austin McFarland would not

lie, and was far too shrewd to be deceived in such a fashion.

And yet, despite this self-reasoning, John Cromwell pressed his tired steed mercilessly up the long slope which led to the point from whence their first glimpse could be caught of the Shamrock.

The gaunt Scot was mounted as well, and rode far lighter, despite his greater length of limb, and he was the one first to peer across the rise, sending forth a harsh cry as he stood erect in his stirrups.

"It's ended—and they're still standing!" were his words.

They were still on his lips as the Roundhead reached his side and eagerly looked across the intervening space.

His breath came sharply as, by the fading glow, he recognized the long, low walls of the ranch proper still standing, showing no signs of injury.

"It's only the big hay-stack, and the corrals and stables—good luck!" laughed McFarland, in neighborly glee that matters were no worse. "Jerry Fits has proved good as his nickname, I'm thinking, neighbor. If that same isn't him, my eyes are failing me this early in life."

Several human figures were moving to and fro in the red light cast out by the still glowing ruins, and in one of these the keen-eyed Scot readily recognized the portly figure of Gerald Fitzpatrick, even at that distance. But the Roundhead did not respond to his hearty glee. He cast a keen, anxious look toward the southeast, catching his breath sharply as he seemed to distinguish a dim light increasing in that quarter. He even wrenched his horse around as though to race back home, before he realized the fact that it was simply a passing flash over the eye of the glow on which he had been gazing.

Austin McFarland gave a snort of half angry wonder as he noted this instinctive action, and then he cried out sharply:

"Surely ye're not turning back so soon, neighbor? Surely you'll ride on to congratulate Jerry Fits! Ah, man, is this a time to be playing the churl?"

It was not that indignantly reproachful tone that caused John Cromwell to wheel his horse again and send him racing down the gentle slope toward the ruins. For the moment he felt ashamed of his folly in giving way to such mad fears.

McFarland kept by his side, and over their heads floated the wild, ringing yells of the relieved cowboys as they dashed after. Dearly as the majority of them loved a brush with the cattle-thieves, not one of them all but gladly welcomed the truth; that genial, big-hear'd Jerry Fits was still "on deck" and apparently little the worse for that night's work!

Their cheers heralded their coming, and there was a slight bustle among the men about the ruins, though they seemed strangely cool and careless for men who had so recently been battling with an enemy so desperate and cunning as Javelina Juan with his drove of Wild Hogs!

There was no move toward retreating to the strong walls of the Shamrock. And as he noted this, that haunting of vague fear came back to the heart and brain of the Roundhead.

"We'll soon know—soon get at the whole truth!" came harshly through his clinched teeth, as he drove his reddened spurs deep into the steaming, heaving flanks of his wearied horse.

Austin McFarland watched him curiously, puzzled not a little by his manner, never once suspecting what dark fears were troubling that fiercely riding man. His thin lips curled, half in scorn, half in anger at this merciless abuse of an overtasked dumb brute.

"Ye'll murder the beastie, man!" he irritably frowned, slackening his own pace, though his mount was far less distressed than the one ridden by the heavy rancher. "It was well enough when ye thought ye was riding to save human life, but now—Auld Clootie fly away with ye, then!"

If Cromwell heard, he paid no heed, but pressed his laboring mount to its utmost, springing to the ground before fat, jolly, bluff Jerry Fits, full quarter of a mile in advance of the rest of the party.

"Glad to see ye, neighbor, but sorry that ye had such a devil av a scamper through the black night, so I am now!" cried Fitzpatrick, grasping the Roundhead with both hands, laughing and shaking heartily.

"You sent for us, and of course we came, hot-foot," said Cromwell, outwardly cold and composed, as he glanced quickly, keenly around.

He was looking for some token of the desperate fight which he had been led to believe was going on at the ranch, but in vain. There were no dead bodies. No blood-stains on the bare ground. Nothing save the glowing ruins to substantiate the story told by Trick Purkett so dramatically!

Jerry Fits left him to hasten to greet McFarland after the same hearty fashion, and the Roundhead, with a glance toward the open door of the not distant ranch proper, turned to one of the cowboys standing hard by, asking abruptly:

"Where are they? How long since they left? Didn't you save even one of the rascals?"

The cowboy stared into that dark face, his own growing puzzled. But then he brightened up and responded:

"Saved 'em all, pardner! Never lost a head nor hoof, though it was a mighty close call fer Miss Molly's pet broncho. Ye see—"

"I mean the raiders," with a still darker frown. "Where are they? Where is Javelina Juan? You had a fight with them, of course?"

"Ef we did, then I'm not knowin' to it," laughed the cowboy. "It was a clean accident, I reckon. Though, to be sure, they's a couple o' the boys missin'. It's jest a chainte that mebbe they both got ketched in the fire, but we hain't hed no chainte fer to 'vestigate as yit. We was waitin' fer the fire to die out more, ye see, an'—waal, go it, durn ye!" muttering, as the Roundhead abruptly turned his back upon him and strode toward Jerry Fits. "I ain't spilin' fer to chin 'long o' the likes o' you—I ain't!"

The owner of Shamrock Ranch whirled around as that heavy hand fell upon his shoulder, and John Cromwell hoarsely uttered:

"Did you send Trick Purkett to ask me for help? Did you bid him tell me that Javelina Juan and his gang of Wild Hogs were attacking your home? Speak out, man! Don't you see I'm almost crazy?"

"Devil a bit—an' faith but ye look that way, man!" spluttered the Irishman, his brogue growing more perceptible with his excitement.

John Cromwell staggered back, covering his face with his hands for a moment, his strong figure shaken with an awful fear. Oh, if he had not so stubbornly fought back his suspicions when they first assailed him! If he had only listened—only turned back long ago!

"Nor Sonora Sam?" sharply chimed in McFarland. "He came to me and swore the same thing! Swore he had to fight his way out of your house, through scores of the thieving rascals! Didn't you send him, man?"

"I sent no such word," was the prompt response. "Why should I? I've seen naught of any thieves, nor have we—"

"Quick!" hoarsely cried the Roundhead, cutting him short in his explanations, realizing the frightful truth only too clearly now. "Give me a fresh horse—mine is pumped out! Haste, man! all that I hold dear on this weary earth is at stake! Can't you understand? It's a foul blow aimed at me and mine! It's a vile trick to get me out of the way while they murder my—God have mercy on my poor wife and child!"

For perhaps the first time since he reached manhood, tears came rolling down those hard, stern cheeks!

CHAPTER VII.

A BUSY LITTLE RASCAL.

"Go it ye cripples! Head up and tail a-rising! The gayest old stampede I ever saw! Ha! ha! ha!"

Through his bony, claw-like fingers Trick Purkett breathed these words, so full of vicious triumph, of unholy joy, that it required all his powers of self-control to refrain from hurling them after the rapidly retreating figure of John Cromwell at the top of his voice.

So intense was this temptation that he dared not trust altogether to his palms, but lowered his head, fairly rooting his face into the short grass as his spurred heels kicked high in mad glee.

"I'm just too happy to live!" he gasped, as he lifted his dusty and bandaged face once more, watching the mounted figures swiftly racing away on a worse than wild goose hunt. "If I could only be nigh enough to see the sour mug of Old Roundhead when he begins to smoke the truth, I know I'd split wide open with pure delight! If I could only see his face when he finds out how beautifully I've sold him for a sucker! If I only could!"

Over the hoof-scored ground the little rascal rolled, now giving full vent to his malicious joy, laughing, howling, screeching until even his well-trained horse pricked up its ears and seemed about to take to flight. And only for the suspicious snorting and pawing, there is no telling how long Trick Purkett might have wasted precious time after this mad fashion.

"Steady, pard!" he cried out, soothingly, as he rose upright, holding the flask of liquor left him by the sympathizing Roundhead between his eyes and that ruddy glow in the north. "Drink hearty, Trick, for richly have you earned the right!"

But that was hardly more than a form, for he barely dampened his throat from the flask, then nimbly leaped into the saddle and urged his still willing steed forward through the night.

"Could you do it, Samuel?" he laughed, mockingly, as he glanced toward the west, then turned to look for an instant at the red glow. "Not a bit of it, pard! You'd hold your breath until the spring failed, even if you knew it would muddle the brain o' ye too bad for clean work! Yes, you would, Samuel! But me—I'm more'n half-dead with drouth, and I can't easy tell my thrapple from the mouth of a lime-kiln; but it isn't any one whisky bottle that can trip me up in the path o' duty, Samuel—not a bit of it!"

Dry and parched though he claimed his throat was, Trick Purkett could laugh and gibber with

satanic glee as he rode rapidly over the prairie, drawing nearer the Rump Ranch, though veering aside from the most direct course like one meaning to pass its buildings at too great a distance for recognition, even if espied by the cowboy guards.

If John Cromwell could have seen him then! If the Roundhead could have caught some of the words that fell from his mocking lips!

His diabolical glee rose highest as he swept past the Rump Ranch, too far away to be seen himself, though the buildings loomed up plainly enough to his keen vision. He lifted the flask and went through the motions of drinking the mock health which he proposed. He added words which would have rent the heart of John Cromwell with fierce rage, which would have blanched the fair cheeks of Faith Cromwell to the hue of death, which would have made the mother's heart sick and faint within her bosom!

And when once more far enough away to be sure the rapid trampling of his horse's hoofs could not reach the ears of the cowboys on guard at the ranch, he plied his spurs vigorously, racing at breakneck speed to join the fierce master whom he was serving that black night.

And it was just after Javelina Juan had sent his men away with Rattlepate Rob and Knight Latchford, that Trick Purkett came within earshot, slackening his pace to send a peculiar signal ahead of him to announce his coming and prevent any awkward mistake in identity.

The response came promptly enough, and his keen eyes distinguished the lithe, sinewy figure of the Wild Hog hastening to meet him, afoot.

"Flag o' truce, Havileeny!" he called out, reining in his panting steed, and lifting his empty hands high above his head. "It's only me!"

"What word? In a word, fellow!" sharply commanded the marauder, but with a thinly disguised anxiety in his tones.

"Good as hard wheat, boss!"

"There has been no hitch? All is well? Everything has gone as I ordered?" eagerly questioned Javelina Juan, reaching the side of the decoy, one hand half-burying its steel-like fingers in his leg as those glowing eyes looked into his bandaged face.

There was something in this intense eagerness that speedily cooled down the little rascal, for he knew that he was playing with fire. What had so fully contented him, might not prove nearly so agreeable to Javelina Juan, be reflected, and this briefly hampered his tongue, so glib as a rule.

The raider chief saw as much, and his breath came in a hot, hissing oath. His grip tightened until the decoy shivered with pain. Those eyes seemed to emit sparks of living fire, and there was death in the voice that uttered:

"Beware how you try to deceive me, dog! Better never have been born than that! Better never have—"

"I done my level best, boss, an' ef it don't clean suit you—"

"You failed to decoy the Roundhead?"

"He's riding with bloody spur to Shamrock Ranch, but he left two men behind to watch over the women. Do what I might, I couldn't make it come no nigher right, boss!"

Javelina Juan removed his hand, turning abruptly toward the tall, black-bearded young man, who stood near at hand in waiting. They spoke rapidly together for a few moments, then the latter approached Purkett.

"You are sure only two men staid behind?"

"Dead sure, boss. Harry Brooks and Joe McCord."

"I'd rather they were almost any other!" with a visible scowl.

"They're smart enough as men run, boss," ventured Purkett, plucking up courage again as he felt the worst was over. "But they're clean three-thirds fooled already, and if you say so, I reckon I kin draw even their teeth before they find time to flesh 'em."

The black-beard turned to rejoin his chief, and Trick Purkett vainly strained his ears to catch some hint as to their conversation.

"Tain't so durn much fun, after all;" he muttered in his throat, with a little shiver of doubt as to the final outcome.

His uneasiness was of brief duration. The consultation lasted only a few minutes, and then the pair came closer to the horseman, Javelina Juan speaking in a much milder tone of voice:

"Tell us just what you have accomplished, my good fellow. Be brief, but omit naught of importance. Time is precious now."

Trick Purkett was only too glad of the chance. Dangerous customers though these were, he felt confident that they could find nothing in his share of that night's work for blame. Instead, they ought to set him on a pedestal of honor as an example for the Wild Hogs!

His tongue never ran more glibly than during the next few minutes, for he felt that his reward, if not his life, hung in the balance. And as he had nothing to conceal, with all to be proud of, from his point of view, he became fairly dramatic as he told how thoroughly he had cast dust into the keen and suspicious eyes of the Roundhead.

"And when he turned back to fetch me his pocket-pistol, I thought I must burst out right

into the face of him!" the little rascal ended, lugging forth the flask to bear mute witness to the truth of his words.

"You have done well—more than well!" nodded Javelina Juan, but with a dark frown on his thin, merciless visage. "If that roundheaded varlet had only hearkened to the words of his women! If he had only taken those other men with him!"

"What matter—to us?" laughed the black-beard, wickedly. "Bad enough for the two poor devils, I grant you, but—"

"And worse for us if they act on his cursedly cunning orders!" flashed the raider chief. "Two stout men, behind stouter walls! Have we time to waste in fighting them thus?"

"Ef I mought chip in, boss?" ventured Trick Purkett.

"Ha! I forgot you, for the moment. You can do—what?"

"I can try, boss," with a smothered chuckle of malice at the fancy. "I left the road open for coming back to Rump Ranch, and I can go there without being suspected. I went off with a pumped-out nag. I looked more like a dead man than one fit for another such long ride. I fell out of the race like one, too! And so, if I manage to crawl back to the ranch, who's to say I'm bent on more mischief?"

Trick Purkett cut himself short, warned by an impatient gesture, for his busy brain was shaping ample material for his glib tongue, and he would have talked for minutes longer, only for that.

"In one word, you'll draw the teeth of those two watch-dogs?"

"Or break a leg in trying, boss!"

"Then away with you! I'll send men to be ready to stampede both bunches of cattle at the signal. I'll come with a few men at my back to make all sure in case you fail. Watch this way, and if all is well, give the signal. If not—"

"I'll manage to let you know how the old thing works, boss!" nodded the decoy, turning his horse and riding rapidly away once more.

"It's a risk, but what would life be without that?" chuckled the busy little rascal as he mercilessly urged his wearied horse along the trail over which he had so recently come. "I'm building up a name this night that'll be remembered long after I'm food for worms!"

It has been said that no man is altogether evil, but it would be a difficult task to point out one redeeming quality in Trick Purkett. Even his daring was thoroughly vile!

As speedily as possible with his now jaded mount, he reached a point from whence it would be safe for him to approach Rump Ranch without endangering the plans he had fairly outlined in his mind. And leaning weakly on the neck of his horse, he advanced at a walk, seemingly little better than a dying man. And his overworked steed unconsciously aided in making the deception perfect.

Trick Purkett struggled to lift himself in response to the stern challenge of Harry Brooks, whose watchful eyes detected his approach.

"Don't shoot—I ain't wu'th a ca'tridge, pard!" he hoarsely gasped, holding up his empty hands for a brief space, then sinking again on the neck of his horse. "Played—clean played!"

"The more fool you fer bein' so bull-headed!" frowned the cowboy, advancing without the faintest thought of deception. "Didn't we all tell ye—stiddy, pard!" leaping forward and catching that drooping shape in his strong arms.

The poor fellow was terribly nigh his death, just then! Trick Purkett gripped the haft of a knife as he lay with head over that broad shoulder, eagerly gazing around in quest of the other cowboy. But his grip relaxed as he caught a glimpse of Joe McCord standing in the partly opened door of the ranch, looking in that direction.

"The boss said—come back," he huskily muttered, as Brooks steadied him on his feet. "I hung on—until I dropped flat—fer Miss Molly—"

"Don't try to talk, yet a bit, pard," soothingly muttered Brooks, half carrying the cunning traitor toward the house. "Time enough when we've patched you up a bit. The ma'am, in yender, 'll mighty soon set that *cabeza* o' yours in trim, an' I'll tote ye thar ef—"

"Don't—I ain't fit—jes' take—thar's the stable, pard!"

Trick Purkett "braced up" remarkably for a dying man, but he knew that it would be worse than ruin were he to permit himself to be taken inside those walls. His sham would be exposed, and then—

Besides, time was passing, and any moment might bring Juan on the scene. That red beacon called for swift work on their part, for it would almost surely rouse the whole neighborhood.

"It's tire, wu'st thing, I reckon, pard," he panted, steadyng himself a bit on his feet. "Ef I kin lay down fer a wink or two. An' ef you kin git me a drink—even o' water!"

Harry Brooks yielded to what he felt was a foolish fancy on an injured man's part, leading him to the stable in which the saddle-horses of the Roundhead and his family were usually kept. But, scarcely had they passed from view

of the house, than Purkett struck a vicious blow with clubbed revolver, full on the head of his kindly helper!

"Hate to do it, pard, but business is business!" he grinned, evilly.

CHAPTER VIII.

FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH!

NEVER did human hand deal a more dastardly stroke than that!

Poor Harry Brooks was wholly unsuspecting of pending evil. His sole thoughts were bent on making this seemingly helpless wretch as comfortable as his means would permit. He left him to support himself for the moment by clinging to a post, while he turned away to draw out fresh, clean hay for a soft bed. Only to be stricken down by a murderous stroke from behind, the heavy revolver-butt crashing with a sickening thud down upon his skull.

Without even a groan or a gasp, the poor fellow fell forward upon his face, only a convulsive shiver running along his muscular form!

Trick Purkett, with those grimly apologetic words upon his lips, turned swiftly to the stable door, reversing the deadly weapon and with finger on trigger as he looked toward the ranch.

"Come on, Josey!" he grinned, his thin lips curling back until his tobacco-stained teeth were revealed. "Come out and take *your* share of the medicine, honey! Do come—Curse you!" with a vicious click of his teeth as he saw the front door closed by the cowboy who remained inside.

He literally foamed at the mouth in his vicious rage. Only an instant ago complete success had seemed so certain! Only a deftly-aimed shot—only another murder on his red hands!

Now—

"How'll I get him out in time?"

He thought of stealing the voice of the poor fellow who lay so quiet on the hay, but would McCord come in response? Wouldn't he think it strange that Brooks should so summon him? Wouldn't he suspect something wrong unless his partner showed himself?

"Just like him!" with a savage growl through his locked teeth. "He's a keener, that Joe! If he hadn't been so mighty lively! Another minute, and I'd have dropped him right in the door!"

For once his fertile brain failed him, though if he had felt sure there was time to spare, no doubt he would quickly have conjured up some cunning scheme for drawing the cowboy out from cover. But that time was lacking, as he knew only too well. His last ride had consumed time, thanks to the necessity for playing his *role* of a sorely wounded and rapidly failing man. And more time had been taken up in drawing poor Brooks out of his comrade's sight, where it would be safe to dispose of him by a blow.

"Anyway, there's only one man and two women to climb over when the Wild Hog comes," he muttered, with a low, hard laugh. "I've settled one, and him heap sight the worst pill in the box! That'd ought to let me out, but who's to say? That devil is mighty quick with his tusks!"

Trick Purkett shivered slightly as he said this, for reckless as he had that night proven himself, there was something about Javelina Juan that chilled his blood whenever he thought of those glittering eyes and that cruelly thin-lipped mouth.

He was still racking his brain for some plausible scheme by which he might complete his dastardly work, when all such thoughts were banished by the loud, angry barking of a couple of dogs near the opposite corral.

"Curse the brutes!" he grated, frowning blackly as he looked out at the stable door. "I clean forgot them! They've scented—I knew it!" with vicious emphasis, as the watch-dogs ran yelping and snarling from the corral toward the point from which he expected Javelina Juan and his men.

Thrusting his head outside, he caught a glimpse of several horsemen approaching the ranch, having abruptly risen from behind the swell.

Doubtless they were the chief and his aides, who were forced from cover by the dogs.

In such emergencies an evil brain can work quickly, and Trick Purkett sprung back to where Harry Brooks lay on the hay, tearing off his heavy blanket-coat and snatching up his broad hat as a means of disguise, trusting to luck for his lack of height to be unremarked by the cowboy on guard inside the ranch.

"You've got to pick trigger mighty lively if you down me, Josey!" he muttered, as he dodged out of the stable and ran quickly toward the horsemen, uttering the agreed-upon signal, but swiftly covering it with a sharp bawl.

"Stiddy, gents!" he cried, imitating the tones of Harry Brooks so perfectly that it might have proved dangerous to himself only for that signal. "Who ay ye, an' what's stirrin' ye so late this night?"

"Yonder fire, pardner," promptly responded the black-beard, catching at the cue. "We knew it meant mischief, when we heard that the Wild Hog had crossed the Grande with his drove of pigs."

"Keep it up, boss!" uttered Purkett, in

guarded tones, as he drew nearer. "I've settled one of 'em, but Joe McCord's inside with a fist full of trumps! He'll die hard and make his teeth meet in the flesh, if he gets half a chance!"

"What are *you* doing here, pard?" in louder tones added the black-beard. "Why ain't you off to help your neighbors? Where's Cromwell?"

"Gone yester, hot-foot, o' course!" was the prompt response. "They's only me an'—I say, Joe!" raising his voice in perfect imitation of Harry Brooks. "Come out here fer a bit. These gents say the Wild Hog is this side o' the drink, an'—"

His speech was cut short by a sharp report, and with a choking yell of mortal agony, the evil decoy flung up his arms, wheeling half-around, then falling in a quivering heap to the ground!

"Don't show—hold the fort, Joe!" cried the genuine Harry Brooks, staggering like a drunken man as he came through the stable door, firing another shot that caused Javelina Juan to throw back his head sharply with a grating oath in Spanish. "It's all a durned—"

He never finished the warning, poor fellow, for the black-beard cut it short with a snap-shot that sent the cowboy reeling dizzily back. The side of the stable checked his fall, but it only held him up long enough for other bullets to find his life.

The black-beard dashed direct toward him, firing a shot at each stroke of his horse's hoofs, the last one into a prostrate corpse, into whose stern face dust was cast by these hoofs as the animal was sharply wrenched up to avert a collision with the low structure.

"Close in!" thundered the black-beard, as a shot from the ranch whipped through that pendent mass of jetty hair, clipping his shoulder as it hummed harmlessly past. "There's only one man inside."

He himself set the example, bending low over the neck of his steed as he dashed straight up to the building, springing over the animal's head as it drew near, alighting cat-like on his feet, laughing harshly as he drew his form close against the wall, knowing that he was fully protected from any shot while remaining thus.

With equal promptitude Javelina Juan and his companions acted, but one of them fell in an insensate heap before the cover was gained, and yet another uttered an angry curse of pain as he felt a bullet tear its way through his shoulder.

If only one man, Joe McCord was all that.

As the feet of Javelina Juan touched the ground, he drew forth a silver whistle and sent out a shrill, far-reaching blast to hurry up the rest of his men. This was wasted breath, however, for they were already in sight, spurting at full speed, warned by those shots. At their heels raced the dogs, snapping and barking, but no attention was paid to them just then. There was bigger game ahead.

The raiders scattered as they came within easy range of the ranch, to lessen the danger, but Joe McCord, from his loop-holed window, sent a constant stream of lead from his repeater, though everything was against his doing fine shooting. Yet despite their rapid movements and the perplexing gloom, barely relieved by the twinkling stars and the newly risen moon, more than one bit of lead had its billet. Here a man went down, there another reeled in his seat, hard hit, and a horse fell with an almost human scream of agony, hurling its rider endlong to roll over and over on the hard ground, then settle down in a motionless heap.

"Only one man, but he's a good one," grimly muttered black-beard, cocking a revolver and sidling along the wall, to suddenly thrust the muzzle of his weapon fairly into the loop as he pulled trigger. "Was a good one, I reckon," he laughed, in evil triumph as he heard a stifled groan, followed by a heavy thump, as of a falling body inside.

Javelina Juan laughed aloud in fierce approval at this exploit, and sprung to the front door, trying to push it open. Only to crouch down and press back again as a flash heralded a shot from within, the bullet fairly fanning his swarthy cheek in its passage.

"Still on deck, eh?" frowned the black-beard. "I could have sworn I raised the roof of his skull!"

"Better so!" snarled Javelina Juan, fairly livid with rage. "I'll kill him by inches. I'll—"

"It's catching first, pard!" laughed the black-beard, recklessly. "Don't be so wild, Juan," he added, in guarded tones as he slipped along to the side of the chief. "Let the men do the hot work; that's what we've got them for, isn't it?"

Something in his tones, in his looks, or in the words he uttered, served to strangely calm the mate raider, and Javelina Juan was once more master of his fiendish temper.

"You are right," he nodded, keeping close to the protecting wall. "It is what they are paid for—my gallant Wild Hogs!"

His last words rung out clearly, and the men clinging to that side of the building looked inquiringly toward their chief. He waved his hand, and they understood that they were to

hold themselves in readiness for prompt work when the proper time came. But before he could say or do more, a shot echoed from the rear of the building, followed by a wild screech of agony!

"How many are they of these devils?" flashed Javelina Juan, startled. "That lying dog of a Purkett said—"

"The women, maybe," interposed the black-beard, frowning. "They're true mates for Old Rounthead, and carry teeth long and sharp enough! Let them go for now: get down to work, or give me the machine!"

"Keep an eye out for another shot, will you?" snarled the chief, with a scowl toward the loop-hole through which had come the lead so nearly adding his life to the bloody list of that night. "I understand its workings best. You keep watch—that's enough for one!"

While muttering these words, Javelina Juan was carefully handling a small object which he took from where it hung at his belt, slipping along the wall until close to the front door. Here he swiftly turned around until facing the wall, keeping as close to it as possible.

The black-beard, pistol in hand, keenly swept the wall with his eyes, and once sent a bullet sideways into the loop from whence Joe McCord had fired his first shots, though he knew his lead could not enter the room from such an angle. But it caused the black tube to be burriedly withdrawn, and with a grim laugh he looked toward the raider chief once more.

Javelina Juan was leaning sideways, fumbling at the door, close to its massive lock. There was an occasional clink as of metal against metal, but his task was quickly completed.

With a fiendish laugh, he drew erect once more, striking a match on the wall, flashing a glance over his men near at hand, muttering:

"Do not fear, my gentle babes! Press close to the wall, and be in readiness to rush in through the opening!"

"And mind ye!" added the black-beard, barely loud enough for their listening ears to catch. "Take the women-folk alive! I'll murder the man who harms a single hair of their heads!"

Javelina Juan leaned forward and touched his match to the fuse protruding from the petard, laughing shrilly as he caught the bright sparks from the wick, pressing hard against the wall as he waited for the explosion which should open for them a passage.

It came very soon, and with the muffled explosion the door was flung open, half its width a mass of splinters!

With cat-like activity the Wild Hogs rushed through the opening, to be greeted with a couple of shots. And the black-beard quickly followed, shouting aloud as he crossed the threshold:

"Spare the women—kill all others, men!"

"Merciful father!" gasped Faith Cromwell as his arms infolded her sinking form. "You—Paul Joyce! You—a murderer!"

CHAPTER IX.

RATTLEPATE AS A JOB'S COMFORTER.

THERE was something of his old recklessness in the tones of Rattleplate Rob as he uttered that grim question, but its usual light-hearted accompaniment was lacking. He spoke like a man who has fairly lost all hope, and this just when the spirits of his companion in trouble were beginning to rise.

"What! you're not breaking so soon, Randal?" half angrily uttered Knight Latchford, rolling over far enough to catch an uncertain glimpse of his helpless guide through the tall grass rising between them.

"Break nothing—not even these blessed cobwebs!" with a short, hard laugh, after a brief but desperate effort to free himself.

Knight Latchford echoed back that sound, but it was a rueful attempt at mirth. He, too, had tested the strength of those bonds, and realized that it would require more than human muscle to snap them asunder.

"They're mighty tough, that's a fact, mate; but I've got two bunches of keys at the end of my wrists, if we can manage to crowd up close enough together to—"

He paused short as Rattleplate Rob made a quick hiss in warning. For a single instant his blood seemed chilling in his veins as he believed those merciless outlaws had repented sparing their lives, and were coming to make still surer work of it.

Stilling his breath he listened with hearing strained until it seemed as though he could detect the growing of the rank grass by the tiny crackling and snapping of its expanding joints!

"False alarm, pardner, I begin to reckon," at length Rattleplate Rob muttered, with a low chuckle that awakened a half-suspicion in the mind of his employer. "Thought I heard the hogs champing their tusks with snouts turned this way, but they don't appear to show up. Well, it's only a question of time and trials. Coyotes. Starvation. Stampede. Or Wild Hogs. And I'll take the last for choice, since it'll be over in a bigger hurry!"

Knight Latchford made no reply. Just then he hardly cared to risk his organs of speech. He was no coward, in the ordinary acceptance of that term. Time and time again he had ventured his life where the odds were all against

him, his brain as clear, his pulse as regular, his nerves as steady as though the word danger had never been invented. Where he saw duty before him, he never paused to calculate the chances for or against himself. But just now—

Rattleplate Rob was proving himself a Job's comforter, in earnest!

Once more the detective strove to stretch his bonds sufficiently far to permit his slipping at least one hand from under them. He knew already that it would be worse than folly to think or try to break those coils of plaited leather.

With a steady, dogged persistence peculiarly his own, Latchford persisted, ceasing only when a passing paralysis attacked the muscles of both arms, rendering him utterly helpless for the time being.

"You'll grow wiser in time, pardner," grimly laughed Rattleplate, as though he had been watching the vain efforts of his companion in trouble. "I could have told you just how it felt, but you didn't ask me, and it isn't my place to offer advice, you know."

"Confound you for—"

"Then Con didn't stop long enough for me to realize the fact—worse luck! Then I'll lick Con clean out of his boots when I find him—or hunt him from croaking time until the crack o' doom for his inhumanity!" solemnly interposed the guide.

It was no use. Despite himself Latchford could not retain anything like anger against this rattlepated young fellow.

"If you would only keep your cheerful observations to yourself, Robert!" he said instead. "If you can't do that, oblige me by hurrying up your croaking act, please! You'd be a heap more cheerful companion as a corpse than I find you just now!"

It was a touch of his own cynical mood, and its effect seemed beneficial on the young ranger just then. Something of his old lightness came back to his short laugh, and he rolled over through the rank grass until he lay almost face to face with his employer.

"All the same, boss, it's gospel truth," he muttered, soberly. "We're in a mighty tight box, and it's only wisdom to look at it in the darkest light. Even if those devils don't repent letting us off so easy, what sort of show have we?"

"Can't we use our voices? I've got a pair of lungs fit to serve a blacksmith as bellows, and—"

"Don't you do it, pard!" sharply interjected the guide, his dark eyes seeming to emit sparks through the gloom surrounding them. "Hold your hush, unless you're spoiling for a free ticket over the range!"

Knight Latchford involuntarily held his breath as he strained his sense of hearing, for the moment fancying that his guide had caught warning of the Wild Hog's return. He did catch the dull, distant, uncertain earth-tremor which marks the far away trampling of a horse's hoofs at speed; but the sound seemed to be retreating rather than drawing nearer the spot where they lay so helpless.

"It isn't so much *that*," added Rattleplate Rob, whose keen eyes noted the action and read that face even through the darkness. "Though they're mighty uncertain critters, those Wild Hogs, take 'em at their level best; and I do reckon we've seen 'em that way this blessed night! All the more reason why we want to let good enough alone, boss!"

"We have so much to thank them for!" with a grim laugh.

"We're still breathing, ain't we, boss?"

"And that's about all!"

"It's a mighty heap, too, when you come to know Javelina Juan as well as I know him, boss!" with increased gravity. "When I made out his ugly phiz, I said good-by old world!"

"Yet you've time and breath enough for saying it all over again."

"You really reckon we've seen the last of Javelina?"

"I hope not!" with emphasis. "I want to meet him once more. Not just now, of course," with a faint laugh. "When my hands are as free as his own. When I can stand up to him, face to face, grip to grip, man against man! I'll ask no more of fate than that!"

"I'd like mighty to look on, too!" nodded Rattleplate. "It'd be well worth seeing—bulldog against peccary—but I'd hate to go hungry until Javelina Juan faces you white-man fashion. That isn't his style, boss. He'd heap likelier slip a blade between your short-ribs from behind, though they do say he can and will fight like a wild-cat when cornered. But that isn't what I meant; I'm wondering how long it'll be before he comes back here to polish us off?"

"If he meant to kill us, why take so much trouble? Why have us carried clear to this hole low? Why not have killed us at once?"

Rattleplate shrugged his broad shoulders as well as circumstances would permit before replying:

"Why does the good Lord suffer such a merciless demon to cumber the earth? Why are such devils brought into the world? You might as well expect me to explain this as to account for the actions of such as the Wild Hog, pard! One would be no harder than the other."

"Then—you think he means to murder us, after all?"

"I don't think anything. It's too much trouble, pard! But if we do go clear, it breaks the record for Javelina, sure."

"All the more reason why we should get our hands free to fight for our lives, then!" half-angrily retorted the detective, once more striving his utmost to release himself.

"I wouldn't mind, but it ain't on the cards, boss," grimly muttered the younger man. "Any one of these *riatas* would hold a mad bull with a single turn; and nigh as I can make out, there's a baker's dozen of those rings on each one of us. But don't let that stop ye, pard, if you find any sport in the trying. Anything to pass away the time."

Knight Latchford abruptly ceased his useless efforts, a new and ugly suspicion flashing across his active brain.

Brave even to the verge of recklessness though he himself was, he could not understand how a man could seem so careless in the face of death, unless—had he been so thoroughly befooled? Had he been too rash in trusting this stranger with his secret?

With that new-born suspicion sending the hot blood tingling through his veins, he had to clinch his teeth sharply in order to hold back the fierce accusation which rose in his throat.

"Tired so soon? Glad of it, pard, for I never did like to see a friend kicking a rock because it happened to stub his toe. The sober fact is we haven't even the ghost of a show. It cuts deep to say it, but perhaps the sooner we look the truth in the face, the more time we'll have for repenting of past sins."

"Then you still think—?"

"All I think would fill a mighty big book, pard," with a short, grating laugh. "Even my clapper would give out before I could tell you the whole of it. And as that's all there is of me left at liberty, play we don't. What's the use, anyway?"

There was silence between them for a brief space. Knight Latchford was still nursing those dark doubts, still trying to solve the enigma so unexpectedly presented him.

Rattleplate Rob, despite his last hinted resolve was the first one to break the silence.

"You're not an old residerer, boss, and naturally you're not any too well posted as to this Wild Hog of ours; but surely you've picked up some information concerning him?"

"Only that there is such a rascal. And that he is said to have a goodly number of spies on this side of the river. Did you ever think of that?"

As he spoke, Latchford strained his eyes to watch the face of his companion, trying to solve his torturing doubts once for all. But he saw nothing to make him the wiser, and the tones of the guide were as even and equable as ever when he made reply:

"Time and again, pardner. More than that, I've had the pleasure of helping lynch two of the p'izen critters! You heard how delighted Javelina was to meet me, a bit ago? Well, you know just why, now!"

"I wonder he let you live on, then!"

"I've been doing that same thing ever since," with a short, uneasy laugh. "That's one reason why I doubt whether we've seen the last of the Wild Hog. It's not his style. And I know that he publicly recorded an oath to flay me alive for robbing him of two of his best allies!"

"One reason, you say," catching at the word. "Isn't that enough?"

There was no immediate response, and the keen-eyed detective fancied he could make out a swift scowl passing over that dark face. He forced a brief laugh as he added:

"Don't answer if you have anything to conceal, Randall. It's rather late in the day for me to be curious concerning your past life, your old connections. I should have taken such precaution at the start."

Rattleplate Rob stared into his face, open-eyed. That dark suspicion had pointed the words with more than appears on their face. Knight Latchford realized as much, but now that he had gone so far, he backed himself up boldly enough.

"I'd rather say it to your face when both our hands were free, Randall, but the fact is I've been thinking—have you really as much to fear from this Wild Hog as you try to make out?"

"Put it still plainer, Latchford, if it isn't too much trouble," was the cold, even response. "You suspect me of being one of Juan's spies?"

"How can I help it?" with sudden irritation. "If you are all you claim, would you rest so easy and careless? Wouldn't you try to escape? Haven't I the right to suspect you, man alive?"

"Wait a bit before I answer all those questions, Mr. Latchford," coldly uttered Randall, by a desperate effort gaining a sitting position before the detective. "Let me ask you one, first. Did you notice that fellow with the black beard? The one who seemed to be taking our part when Javelina Juan talked of putting us to sleep?"

"I saw him; yes. What of it?"

"Just this, pardner," with a laugh that held in it something of his old carelessness. "That beard had no living roots under it. It was never

born on that face. And the owner of that face would have given me heap more than life for as much knowledge as I possessed about you and your object in coming to this part of the country. For that man was none other than the owner of the Pea Jay—Paul Joyce himself!"

CHAPTER X.

BAD ENOUGH, BUT WORSE AHEAD.

KNIGHT LATCHFORD started to a sitting posture, with a sharp ejaculation of angry wonder and doubt commingled.

"You don't—how do you know that, man?" he hoarsely uttered, the great veins starting out on his temples, his eyes seeming on fire as he leaned forward until his face almost touched that of the guide.

"By the two eyes o' me, pardner," laughed Rattleplate, steadily meeting that fiery gaze. "Thanks to a little accident that laid his sweet face bare for a single breath—long enough for less keen sight than mine to recognize the dandy ranchero! Hardly as long as a sweetheart might ask for, but plenty time for a hater as hearty as I am!"

Still Latchford stared suspiciously into that dark face, trying to read what lay beneath the surface, despite the darkness with which they were both enveloped.

"You're eating the heart out o' ye without cause, Latchford," Rattleplate coldly added. "You're betraying the length of your ears heap plainer than there's any need of. Why, you infernal idiot!" with a sudden burst of irritation. "If I was the traitor you fancy, wouldn't I have shown you up right then and there? I'd never have been in peril through your resentment. Paul Joyce would have downed you, *too* quick!"

"You are sure—there is no mistake?" muttered Latchford, his wits seemingly dulled by the unexpected revelation.

"Take me for a traitor; take me for a spy and pard of the Wild Hog, if you like; but don't write me down a fool, pardner," lightly retorted Rattleplate Rob, abandoning his sitting posture for the more comfortable recumbency on the grass, where his limbs were less cramped. "I saw his face plain enough as his beard caught on Javelina's shoulder and was twitched off. I knew that it meant death to both of us if I let him suspect as much, and my head drooped in a monstrous hurry. It was a close shave, but he didn't catch me. That goes without saying, since I'm still in talking order."

"Paul Joyce! An ally of that—why not? with a hard, chilling laugh as he tossed back his head and stretched his neck as though he found it difficult to breathe freely. "It's all of a piece with the rest of his career! If I had only known it at the time!"

"Count me out of that wish, pardner," grunted Rattleplate. "I took you for a man of nerve, while here you're snorting and chawing soap worse than a licked kid in a corner!"

There was a space of silence, during which Knight Latchford sat with head drooping on his bosom, and Rattleplate curiously watching him the while, rapidly recovering his temper, so disagreeably aroused by that foul suspicion. Presently he spoke:

"When you get back your wits, pardner, I've got a weenty bit more chin music ready for you. Don't hurry," as the detective gave a start, like one suddenly recalled from a dream or reverie. "If we're to see the sun rise again, there's plenty of time. If not—well, it won't matter much in the other world!"

"I'm listening. What have you to say to me?"

"Never another word if we hadn't broken bread in company. Never a word if I hadn't gripped your hand as a white man in heart as you are in looks, Knight Latchford. But I've done all this. I've slept by your side. I've called you pard. More than that, I've met you on your own level, though I've often swore hatred and contempt for all of your bloodhound tribe!"

"Is this all you have to tell me, Randall?" coldly.

"Only for this, I'd laugh at your fool suspicions. I'd let you measure me in your own bushel, and be glad to get shut of you so easy. As it is, I swear to you that you are showing yourself worse than an ass, Knight Latchford! I swear to you by the grave of my sainted mother that I'm clean white, from top to toe! I've never consorted with the like of the Wild Hog. The greatest crime of which I've been guilty is in associating with you!"

There was no room for doubting his perfect sincerity. No man could counterfeit that hot indignation; no scoundrel speak so reverently of the mother who bore him.

Knight Latchford was no fool, in the ordinary acceptance of the term. As he listened, his wild suspicions vanished, and a hot flush crept over his face at his own folly. But he was manly enough to own himself in the wrong, and he frankly responded:

"I was a fool, Randall, but at the worst I only doubted you; I couldn't really convince myself that you were guilty. I ask your pardon for that much. I wish I could offer you my hand on it!"

"I wouldn't take it if you did," was the cold retort. "As long as I could separate you, as a man, from your trade, I almost liked you. I was ready and even eager to help you in running down your game; not so much for your sake, or the sake of justice, though, as because I felt Paul Joyce was a menace to the dearest friend of my dearest friend."

"You mean the Roundhead's daughter?" eagerly asked Latchford.

There was no immediate response. Those dark eyes were cast downward, and Rattleplate Rob seemed debating with himself whether or not he had best say more.

Latchford broke in with a short, forced laugh:

"Don't talk if it's too much bother, Robert! After all, we're fast-foot here, while my hoped-for game is foot-free—and likely to remain thus, for all of us!"

"I meant something of the sort when I checked you calling for help a bit ago," muttered the young ranger. "I knew that the chances were against any other party hearing you, and if that devil in disguise should come for another look—well, he might suspect too much for the good of our health!"

"Do you know, I almost wish he would come back?" laughed Latchford.

"For what?"

"To show you how thoroughly I've repented my foolish suspicions," was the quick response. "To prove how little I fear your betraying me to that devil who'd pay you almost any price for the information!"

There was no acting in this. Rattleplate Rob saw that the detective was thoroughly in earnest, and his resentment rapidly dissipated before that undisguised repentance.

"I'll take your word for it, pardner, without wanting to run the risks," with something of his usual cordiality. "All the same, I reckon we'd better consider our contract broken if we're lucky enough to get out of this hobble with our lives."

"Because I am a detective, or because you are still angry with me for wrongfully suspecting you?"

"The first, pardner. I never did cotton to the profession. I've always looked upon them as only one degree above four-footed bloodhounds—that of speech—and far below them in honesty of purpose."

"Yet you quickly agreed to aid me in running a man down to the gallows."

"Because I felt that while he cursed this earth he was endangering the peace of a girl—an angel of light in comparison."

"Yet you offer to fly the track because of a silly prejudice? You say you'll turn back and leave this angel at the mercy of this demon, simply because I am a detective? Isn't that a rather poor compliment to your powers of friendship, Robert?"

Rattleplate grunted in disgust as he glanced downward at his bonds.

"We're foot-fast. You said it yourself, man!"

"But are we to remain foot-fast for all time?"

"Ask me something easier, pard."

"I for one have no such thought," doggedly. "I mean to get free. And yet—I'm foolish, perhaps, but somehow I feel that I'll never see the end of the trail I've sworn to follow until death ends it; my death or the death of the fiend who butchered my poor nephew."

"It's an empty stomach, I reckon, pard," grimly laughed Rattleplate. "I'm feeling something like that myself, just now."

"I have only your suspicions to prove that this Paul Joyce is the criminal I seek. I have never met him face to face—unless this night, when he was disguised and unsuspected by me."

"I'll swear he's the perfect image of the picture you showed me."

"If so, then he is my man! But if you care for the friend of your friend, promise me that, should aught happen to put me off duty forever, you will run the rascal down to his rope. In the name of justice I ask you to do this, Robert Randall!"

The usually cold, reserved detective spoke with almost feverish eagerness, his eyes glowing through the gloom as if on fire. He leaned forward until he lost his balance and fell upon his side. He lay thus, his face almost touching that of the younger man, too deeply interested in his answer to change his position just then.

That answer was slow in coming, as though Rattleplate had to carefully weigh each word before giving it utterance.

"I'll say this much, Latchford—if I get out of this scrape, and harm befalls you before you can get in your work on Joyce, I'll put a spider in his dumpling, if possible."

"Swear that you'll hunt him down to the gallows!"

"I won't go that far, just now," was the deliberate response. "I'll agree to put the Old Roundhead on his guard against him. I'll repeat to him all you told me about that murder when you showed me the picture which I recognized as that of Paul Joyce. I'll tell him that I saw the rascal in company with Javelina Juan this—ha!" rising to a sitting posture as though impelled by some powerful spring, his dark eyes

fairly flashing fire as he hoarsely added; "What was he doing here with that devilish gang? What—"

"Isn't the Rump Ranch highest us?" slowly asked Latchford.

"And I never once thought of poor Faith in connection with all this!" groaned Randall, his head drooping on his bosom.

Latchford made no response, though his face lit up with a hard, exultant smile. He felt sure of a strong ally, after this!

Only for a brief space did Rattlepate give way to those powerful emotions. Then, hoarsely bidding Latchford lie down and turn his back, he rolled close up against him, trying to loosen his bonds. For many minutes he doggedly persisted, even though the first attempt told him it was time and labor wasted. The lariats were wound tightly about them, and there was but a single knot; but that was tied too firmly for hampered fingers to slacken the oiled bull-hide plaiting.

"It's no use," he muttered, sullenly, at length, changing his cramped position for one more comfortable. "We've got to wait until somebody chances along this way!"

"Is there much chance of that?" ventured Latchford.

"As much chance as we stand being killed by a falling star! We are out of anything like a trail, and in grass so deep that we wouldn't be seen by a horseman passing ten yards away! Figure it out for yourself, pardner!"

"We have our voices left, anyway."

"We'll use them when daylight comes, though it's a mighty slim chance, even then. We're over two miles from Rump Ranch. And if that is raided—when it is raided, I should say!" with a harsh laugh that had precious little mirth in it, "what then? The alarm will spread, and every sound man in the country will take the trail of those devils, to follow them to the river, if not further! They will be gone a full week at the shortest. By the time they get back—well, I reckon they'll have to ask the coyotes who helped make such a nasty mess in this hole—for you nor I will ever answer 'em!"

Despite his undoubted nerve, Knight Latchford shivered coldly at this hard, grim speech. Never before had he so fully realized their peril. Never until then had he come so near to utterly losing all hope of eventually escaping from the Wild Hog's toils.

He made no reply, and Rattlepate Rob evidently considered that he had made the situation sufficiently clear for the time being, since even his glib tongue was silent. Only for a few minutes.

"I thought it was bad enough, but there's worse coming!" he suddenly said, sitting up with wonderful celerity for one so heavily bound.

"Is it thunder?" asked Latchford. "The sky is so clear that—"

"It's death, man!" sternly cried Rattlepate. "Listen! can't you hear them? Can't you hear the crackling of split hoofs? The cattle are stamped, and they're coming straight for us!"

CHAPTER XI.

A MERCILESS VICTOR.

THE black-beard closed his arms about his captive tightly, an oath scorching his lips at that wild greeting. Or, it might have been at the frenzied attack made upon him at that instant by the mother of the swooning girl whose bloodless face rested against his shoulder.

Mrs. Cromwell came out from between the wall and the door hurled open by the bursting petard, her failing powers restored by that wailing cry, and only for the swift hand of Javelina Juan, the black-beard would have fared but poorly, hampered as he was by that limp figure on his arm.

"To me, tiger-cat!" shrilly laughed the chief, striking up the revolver just as it exploded, its muzzle so close to the younger raider that the explosion alone was sufficient to knock the hat from his head. "To my arms, fair lady! Thus—at last, sweetheart!"

Like one who has met with a long-sought prize, Javelina Juan fastened upon the half-crazed mother, swinging her around and half-forcing, half-carrying her across the threshold into the night-air.

"Kill all the rest, my gallant pigs!" his shrill, harsh tones rung out as he glanced over his shoulder. "Shoot and carve and rend all ye can find in the *casa* now, my brave tuskers!"

Close at his side stood the black-beard, also looking back into the ranch through the open door. Over his left shoulder drooped the blonde head of poor Faith Cromwell, more like a corpse than aught alive, a merciful oblivion having fallen upon her as she recognized the voice of her lover in this ruthless marauder.

"There was only one, and I reckon I disposed of him when—"

The sentence was cut short by two sharp explosions inside, the red glow of burning powder briefly lighting up the interior, and showing the Wild Hogs a recumbent figure at the further side of the room.

For a single breath they shrunk back, one of their number spinning around on his heel and making a blind, uncertain dive for the door,

falling with his body half-over the threshold, writhing in death-agony.

Then—

Javelina showed his white teeth in the moonlight as he watched and listened. With one arm he held Mrs. Cromwell helpless. In his free hand he clutched an ugly knife, quivering it as though he longed to be among the foremost in that savage charge of his men upon gallant Joe McCord, as he lay crippled on the floor already so redly stained with his life-blood.

Hot phrases in Spanish passed his thin lips, apparently bidding his men slay and spare not. And as she thus believed, the wife of the absent Roundhead found time to breathe a prayer of thanksgiving that he had been called away that night!

The sickening deed was quickly ended. Crippled by the shot which the black-beard had fired through the loop-hole, the gallant cowboy could offer but a feeble resistance to such numbers of bloodthirsty foemen. He fired one more shot, but it was hardly consciously on his part, for he was dying when the door was blown inward.

Something like remorse sounded in the voice of the black-beard as the Wild Hogs dragged the corpse out of the building, to make sure of their work.

"If each one of your men were his equal, Juan, you wouldn't need darkness to cover your raids—all Texas couldn't lay a twig in your path! Poor devil!"

Javelina Juan turned upon him with an ugly sneer and wickedly flashing eyes.

"Curb thy tongue, Pablo, lest some of my pigs snap it off for pay! Are they not helping along your work? Is it you that should flout them now? Was it Tejanos you summoned when you needed—"

With an angry gesture of warning Pablo checked that risky tongue, and Javelina Juan seemed swift to understand.

"Then why deny your countrymen, Pablo? Mexico for Mexicans! It is my motto, and it should also be yours, by the blood that fills your veins! Is it only for fighting that we live? Is it only—bah!" with an impatient flourish of the bare blade before thrusting it into its sheath before him.

He lifted his voice, and the marauders instantly fell back from the mutilated corpse of the gallant cowboy. One of their number hurriedly drew near the chief, uncovering his head as he awaited orders.

"It is well, Mantchez," spoke Javelina Juan, his tones cold and hard. "You have won the fight, you and my gallant pigs. It is just that you reap the reward of valor, and so—beware of fire, good Mantchez! No need to warn the fighting dogs before the hour!"

The speech might have been more clear, perhaps, but Mantchez had no difficulty in comprehending the meaning of his chief. He mumbled out his thanks, then shambled away to the shivered door of the ranch, blocking the passage with his burly figure before calling out:

"Torches, my noble men! The honorable chief gives us permission to collect such little relics as may strike our fancy, and—"

There came a chorus of joyous cries, loud enough to drown his further speech, if he took the trouble to make any. He waved them back in their rush for booty, but he could hardly have checked them without the sharp words of Javelina Juan:

"Take three men, Mantchez, and bring forth all you think worth carrying so far. See that no sparks are left behind you, to paint our back-track red. All others turn to getting the stock in motion!"

Those crisp sentences worked a marvelous change in the raiders, and Mantchez no longer held the breach. If it was to be an equal division, instead of "finding keepers," why over-exert himself?

Until now Pablo—he of the black beard, whom two different persons had that night identified as the owner of Pea Jay Ranch—was content to stand idly watching and waiting, the unconscious maiden lying motionless across his left shoulder. But now his fears seemed to be awakened lest this should prove something more serious than a simple fainting-fit, and he shifted his burden until he could gaze down into her ghastly pale face.

Mrs. Cromwell was watching him closely, held in that vise-like grip. But as she caught sight of that white face, so death-like, she cried aloud in a mother's agony, wresting herself free for an instant:

"My child—you have murdered her! My child—give her to me!"

Tiger-like in his swiftness, Javelina Juan caught the distracted woman before she could reach the captor of her child, his vicious grip wrenching her helplessly back as Pablo moved with his inanimate burden toward the pump.

"Bring her along, Juan," he flashed over his shoulder, his face and voice both showing real uneasiness. "Let her help bring this dainty morsel back to life, if she will!"

Without a word the outlaw chief complied, though he still kept his merciless grip fastened upon the nearly crazed woman. And that grip

was only broken when Pablo, placing the head of Faith on the lap of her mother as she crouched beside the rude trough beneath the pump, unclasped his yellow, claw-like fingers.

"Time enough, Juan," he muttered, harshly, his dark eyes riveted on the corpse-like countenance of the maiden as her mother bathed her brows with cold water, moaning, sobbing, praying over her darling. "You have all time before you in which to slake your vengeance, man!"

"Short enough, though that time extended from now through all eternity!" viciously flashed the Mexican, his yellow face fairly hidden with his mad passions uppermost.

Pablo said nothing. Almost breathlessly he watched the tender ministrations of the poor mother, his lungs only filling freely when he saw a slight quivering of those white lids—when he noted the feeble fluttering of those blanched lips.

"It's all right!" and his dark eyes flashed with exultation as the words passed his lips. "She's still alive, and—"

"Who so fit to nurse her back to life and strength as a lover?" mockingly laughed Javelina Juan, as his yellow fingers grasped Mrs. Cromwell by the arms, holding her helpless while Pablo lifted the dimly conscious maiden's head from her lap. "Who so cruel as to intrude upon such a delicious wakening? Not I! Not you, my gentle wild-cat!"

In vain the nearly crazed woman alternately pleaded and struggled against this cruel separation. Javelina Juan seemed in his most pitiless mood that night, and he dragged the mother away from her child, not even remaining where she could look upon her dear one.

She only ceased her worse than vain exertions when taken around to the opposite side of the house. When she could no longer see her child, her feverish powers gave way all at once, and she sunk to the ground, shivering in silence, seemingly broken in spirit as in strength.

This was so sudden that it startled even the outlaw chief, and he bent with an ejaculation of mingled rage and alarm, turning her face up to the light with a hand beneath her chin. Only for an instant. He met such a burning gaze—so full of unutterable hatred that it sent him back a pace in an involuntary recoil. It was like a terrible curse flung in his face!

Despite his hard heart and strong nerves, Javelina Juan felt a peculiar chill creeping over him, and his face showed something of this, despite the harsh laugh with which he sought to cover his start.

"Is it so, my gentle wild-cat? Art thou thirsting for my rich red blood? Wouldst thou sink thy fangs deep in the throat of the Wild Hog? Or—is it hopeless love which I see mirrored in thy glorious orbs?"

"Spare her—harm my child, and I'll kill you!" slowly, painfully uttered the mother, never removing that burning gaze.

Close following her strained speech came the sound of clattering hoofs and frightened bellowings as the stock—horses, mules and cattle mingling together—burst from the corrals hard by and went thundering over the plain with heads pointing toward the far-off Rio Grande!

In watching this, Javelina Juan seemed to forget to answer that threat and prayer combined, and as Mantchez with his fellows came out of the looted ranch, laden down with valuables, he hailed the brutal outlaw, bidding him hasten the packing up, then come to him.

These orders were promptly carried out, for now that their prize was fairly won, all of the rascals were eager to be in the saddle and fleeing from the fierce pursuit which, past experience warned them, must surely follow.

Just as Mantchez came to take charge of Mrs. Cromwell, another outlaw hurried up and saluted his chief, saying:

"What shall we do with the decoy, Sir Captain? He is begging hard for aid—is praying to his patron saint that he may not be left behind to the grim mercy of the Tejanos!"

"Is he not dead, then?" muttered Javelina Juan, hurrying away toward the spot where Trick Purkett had fallen before the avenging shot of poor Harry Brooks.

"Thank heaven you've come, boss!" gasped the wounded wretch, painfully lifting his head and shoulders from the bloody pool in which he had fallen. "I'm all right now! I've served you too faithfully—"

"What are you doing here?" coldly interjected the chief, drawing back from that appealing hand. "Why are you not up and at work?"

"I'm too bad—don't leave me for—they'll butcher me by inches!" chokingly cried the wretch, dragging himself painfully along the ground as if he would embrace those knees.

Javelina Juan turned a look of inquiry into the face of the man who had brought him word, but the outlaw slowly shook his head in silent answer to that unspoken question.

"He lies!" gasped Purkett, desperately trying to gain his feet, only to fall on his face with a hollow groan of agony. "I'm all—I'm not bad—take me with—"

He choked, shivering as one in a severe chill.

"Mount your horse and do your duty, dog!" coldly, mercilessly uttered Javelina Juan.

"Fall in with the rest, if you do not wish to be left behind," turning on his heel to stride away.

"I can't—don't desert me—don't!"

"Then blow your own brains out," harshly interposed the chief, flinging the words over his shoulder. "I have no further use for a crippled cur."

As he saw his last hope failing him, Trick Purkett fairly rose to his feet, but only to fall helpless, groaning and moaning in agony.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WAGES OF SIN.

JAVELINA JUAN never looked back as the crippled wretch fell to the ground. As he said, he had no further use for a disabled tool, valuable service though that tool had rendered him. Nothing else could have so thoroughly exposed his utter heartlessness!

The Wild Hog hastened to where Pablo was standing beside his fair captive, now fully restored to her senses, but with head bowed in her lap, sobbing convulsively.

"It is time we were in the saddle, Pablo, my brave," lightly cried the chief, with hardly a passing glance at the poor girl. "The Roundhead will return faster than he went, when he finds how thoroughly he has been befooled! You know what that means, my son?"

"And your captive?" muttered Pablo, frowningly. "She is not—"

"If you could have seen how coolly she vowed to drain my veins, you'd never again doubt her vitality!" laughed the outlaw, mockingly.

"Then let them ride close together," with an air of relief. "I was getting puzzled—you see how she takes it?"

"Because she mistakes you for her other lover, my son," coolly uttered Javelina Juan. "She will brighten up ere long. If not—well, that is your lookout, not mine!"

Putting the silver whistle to his lips, he blew two short blasts, which were promptly answered by his men bringing horses. One of these men, tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered and ungainly, visibly hesitated as he passed reins to the chief.

"What is it, Sonora?" was the sharp demand.

"Waal, I reckon it's Trick Purkett, boss," hesitated the fellow, with a swift glance over his shoulder toward where the crippled decoy was feebly cursing and raving.

"What have I to do with him? If he cannot ride, let him creep!"

"Ef that was all—durn it, boss!" with a dubious rubbing of his frowsy pate. "What ef he is—or was—a pard? What ef—"

Javelina Juan brushed past him to confront Purkett once more. And once more the miserable wretch brokenly begged for aid—begged to be bound upon a horse, if there was no more merciful method of carrying him from the spot.

And once again the raider brutally refused him.

"Kill me, then!" gasped Purkett, in agony of desperation. "If you desert me now, I'll live long enough to confess all to—I'll tell the whole foul plot to the Roundhead, if he roasts me alive!"

But Javelina Juan never once looked back, cold, pitiless, as before.

"It was that I wanted to tell ye, boss," mumbled Sonora Sam. "He's little ole p'izen when he gits his mad up that way! I reckon he'll be jest bull-headed 'nough fer to make a live o' it long 'nough to blow the hull business to the Roundhead, too."

"Blow his brains out, then!" with a vicious snarl. "Or, if you're too tender-hearted for that—your old pard, you said?"

"Sorter, boss," with a faint grin on his bony visage. "But not so mighty much that I can't kerry out orders, ef orders is giv' me from headquarters."

Javelina Juan bent forward and gazed keenly into his face. What he saw there drew a light laugh from his lips, with the further words:

"You are a man after my own heart, Sonora! Business before friendship, is it?"

"When you say so, boss!"

"I do say so. Put a close seal on that rascal's lips!"

Sonora Sam turned on his heels as Javelina Juan rejoined the black-bearded outlaw, and as he saw his partner groveling in the dust, wildly mumbling his vengeance, a peculiar smile lit up his harsh countenance.

"They was al'ays one fool atwixt the couple o' us, Trick, but I never was so nigh sure which it was, until right now," he muttered as he stooped and roughly shook the half-delirious rascal.

"It's you—I knew—you wouldn't shake me, pard!" gasped the crippled rascal, his brain clearing and his voice growing stronger as he saw one whom he felt to be a friend.

"Yit you swore to blow onto us all, Trick! An' I'm one o' the gang now, ye want to b'ar in mind, pard!"

"I was—I didn't know what—fear o' him drove me mad!"

Sonora Sam cast a swift glance around. No one was watching him, so far as he could tell. Javelina Juan was already in the saddle, accompanied by Pablo. The latter held the maiden on his lap, while Mrs. Cromwell was riding close by

his side, one trembling hand touching her idolized child.

Mantchez, with several others, were riding a little behind them, all others having pressed on to keep the stampeded stock together and urge it to greater speed, if necessary.

"The boss told me to lift your roof, Trick," muttered Sonora Sam, nervously fingering his revolver. "He said he hedn't no furder use fer you, but that he loved the click-clack o' your tongue too mighty well fer to give old Roundhead the pleasure o' listenin' to it!"

"You won't—ain't we old pards?" faltered Purkett, shrinking back as he saw the weapon come from its scabbard.

"Ef I don't burn powder, mebbe the boss 'll ax me whar I got my still stuff from, pardner. An' ef I cain't show a red blade, nuther? What you reckon he'll say to me then?"

"I'll haunt you through life!" desperately cried the poor rascal.

Sonora Sam gave a start, his hard countenance changing rapidly. He was fairly saturated with superstition, and Trick Purkett could not have hit upon a surer plea than that one!

"I've got to go through the motions, anyway, pard," muttered Sam, with another glance toward the retreating marauders.

Was it fancy, or did he see Javelina Juan looking back?

He fired a shot into the ground a few feet from the shivering cripple, then laughed shortly as he added:

"That'd be mighty rough on a ole pard, Purkett! I never 'lowed to raally kill you, an' only tuck the job to give ye a shake fer yer life. Ef I hedn't jumped at the job, 'nother critter would a' tuck holt, an' never thunk o' reskin' what I'm doin' now."

"Thank—you'll help—away?" gasped Purkett, faintly, the sudden reaction almost overpowering him.

"Won't 1? Why not?" soothingly muttered Sonora, gently removing the weapons from the belt of the wounded decoy, then laughing harshly as Purkett, feeling this, tried to stop his hand. "You'd try to use your teeth ef I didn't draw 'em, pard? I thunk as much, an' now—

"You cain't ha'nt me, fer it wasn't my shot that keeled you over, Trick. Nur yit I ain't gwine fer to lay the weight o' my leetle finger onto ye in the way o' harm. That lets me out! Don't I know? Hain't I made ha'ntin' a study the biggest heft o' my life? Ha'nt them that snuffed your wick, pard! You cain't tetch me fer jest leavin' of ye lay on the bed you made fer yer own self—no you cain't, pard!"

With a harsh, triumphant laugh at his own reasoning, Sonora Sam turned away from the despairing wretch, mounting his horse and riding at top speed after the retreating Wild Hogs!

Not a word did Trick Purkett utter, though he feebly propped himself upon his hands to stare with swimming eyes after his recreant partner until the shades of night shut down between them.

Then his head drooped, with a long, painful groan, and he lay under the twinkling stars, lay in the growing moonlight still and motionless as though the grip of death had indeed claimed him forever.

But not for long. A convulsive shiver shook his form. He gave a gasp of pain, but persisted in spite of it, lifting his head and body on his hands, staring dizzily around the desolate scene.

He saw the pump, only a few rods away, and another moan parted his cracked and bleeding lips as he thought of the cool, fresh water! If he could only reach it! If he could only quench that horrible fire in his vitals! If he only—he would!

"Got to—will live—to tell—"

He bit off his panting speech, doggedly clinching his teeth, digging his fingers into the dry ground and slowly, painfully dragging his helpless carcass after him, toward the pump.

Inch by inch, with many a brief pause—he dared not make them longer, despite the horrible torture which the slightest movement caused him, lest he die before his goal be won—he crawled on, his half-blind eyes riveted on the tub standing under the spout.

Oh, to reach that! To drag himself up until he could plunge his head into the liquid element! Until he could drown that horrible fire which was killing him, even more surely than the wound which bled so terribly nigh to his heart!

Little by little, but oh! so horribly slow! Little by little, until his outstretched hand could almost touch the half-barrel—until his finger-tips dabbed and slipped on the mud at its base! Another foot to be won—but he groaned aloud in agony as his powers seemed to fail him, all at once. To fail—and water so near him!

"He'll never know. I'll die like a dog, and they'll laugh in triumph as they share the spoil between them—the plunder which they could never have won, only for me!" he mentally groaned; and thus spurred to a final effort, Trick Purkett succeeded.

His fingers closed on the damp rim of the half-barrel. Inch by inch he dragged his almost helpless body up—until he could thrust his face into the grateful element.

Long and eagerly he drank, the cool water seeming to send fresh blood into his veins, to re-

new his bodily power, to slowly but surely drive away that horrible paralysis which had so nearly overcome him.

"Not too much," he gasped, lifting his head, his eyes clearing. "I mustn't founder myself too soon. I've got to—tell my story."

That was his sole thought, now that he had momentarily quenched that internal fire. He knew that he must die, even if John Cromwell was too late to kill him for his treachery. And knowing this, he longed to be revenged on those who had left him to perish like a worthless cur, now that he could no longer be of service.

The cold water revived him so far that, stuffing a dampened rag into the bleeding wound above his heart, he dragged himself to his feet, holding fast to the pump until that sudden faintness passed away, then staggering toward the ranch.

"I can write—all the truth!" he muttered, spreading his arms to steady his swaying form as he reeled on toward the open door.

It was all he could do to cover the distance, and only for the wall itself he would have fallen flat. Once down, would he ever be able to rise again?

He stubbornly fought back his faintness. He kept muttering his vow over and over in his throat. He would live—he would not fail until he had set his vengeance to working.

Mortal man never made a tougher fight than did Trick Purkett that night. Let it stand to his credit. Surely he needs it.

He crossed the threshold, catching by a chair as he ran against it, and saving himself from falling. By this support he held fast with one hand until the glimmer of a match showed him an unlighted lamp on a shelf. By the aid of the chair, sliding it over the floor before him, he managed to reach and light the lamp.

He shivered a little as its beams fell on the blood of poor Joe McCord, lying near his feet, but he quickly conquered that emotion. He had room only for his vengeance.

He searched the room for writing materials, but without success. He passed into the next room, from thence into the kitchen, but with the same result: and a fierce groan passed his lips as he felt that, after all his toil and pain and perseverance, he must leave his secret untold.

He could not mount to the second story, and so he gave over that plan. Another occurred to him: there was nothing else left.

He hurled the lamp into a corner, mashing it into atoms, the oil scattering and blazing up fiercely. And laughing frightfully, he waited until certain the floor and partition wall was ignited, then pushed his chair to the front door, steadying himself for a moment before stumbling across the threshold, to stagger and reel—to fall in a nerveless heap only a few feet away, faintly gasping:

"Come—red spur—come before—I die, Round—"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN HOUR OF AGONY.

EVEN jolly, bluff and lively Jerry Fits seemed awed by that unaccustomed sight—the grim old Roundhead in tears.

It was left for a woman to utter the first word of comfort and reassurance, and the fat rancher gave a hearty gasp of relief as he saw his daughter Molly hastening toward them, her fair face lighted up with a rosy glow by the burning ruins.

"Talk to him, Molly, ye devil," spluttered Jerry, the words fairly tripping over each other in his excitement. "Sure, he's aff his noot! Talk to him, ye litttle devil, an' soother him down a bit afoor—"

If Molly heard, she gave no sign. From the ranch door she had witnessed the coming in hot haste of the Roundhead, and from thence she had viewed all that transpired since. She heard his hoarse cry for fresh mounts, and a great pang of pity entered her kind heart as that white, tear-marked face turned her way.

"Sure, daddy, ye're worrying your poor heart without need," she uttered, her full, rich tones lowered through pure sympathy, as her round arm half-encircled the stricken man's neck, her big blue eyes looking into his as though trying to inoculate him with a bit of her own hopefulness. "It's no worse than a cruel trick, and before day dawns ye'll be laughing over it with the rest of us."

John Cromwell gave his sturdy figure a vigorous shake, dashing a hand across his eyes as though feeling ashamed of his weakness. He touched that broad, white brow with his cold lips, forcing a faint smile to his own, though he found it impossible to steady the voice with which he formed the words:

"It's very kind of you, Molly, and I'll not soon forget it; but I'm dreading the worst, and—must I ride back to my dear ones on yonder foundered brute?"

There was something of his old, cold fierceness as he pointed to his broken-down mount, but Molly Fits only clung the closer to him.

"Never a bit of it, daddy. Ye'll have your pick of all Shamrock, or Molly Fits has lost her influence, and—Jerry Fits!"

"It's hearin' ye I am, Molly, darlint!"

"Start the lads to saddling up the pick of the corral, honey, and have them ready by the time I've poured a cup of hot coffee for Mr. Cromwell. Never a word will I hear to the contrary, daddy," she laughed, clinging to the arm of the Roundhead and actually forcing him toward the ranch.

It was just what the heart-racked man needed most, this hearty yet womanly influence. That terrible dread had so thoroughly shaken him, had so completely shattered his nerves. He was far from being his usual self in those first few minutes, and he yielded almost like a child.

Molly Fits did not press her advantage too far. She permitted him to sink down on the doorstep, where he could see the Shamrock men hurrying to catch and equip fresh mounts for the entire party of rescuers, with fat Jerry Fits spurring them on with neighborly zeal. She filled a big bowl with hot, steaming, strong coffee, bringing it to the master of Rump Ranch as she bade the cook carry like refreshment out to the men who had ridden so far and so fast in their zeal to serve a neighbor in trouble. And as she forced John Cromwell to swallow the grateful beverage, she said all she could to strengthen his mind and encourage his heart.

"Look at that, now!" she ejaculated, her fair face aglow with kindly triumph as she drew from him the facts of the case. "Is it eating out the heart o' ye with fears, when two such good men are guarding little Faith and her mother? Even if there was trouble meant ye—which Heaven forbid!—could it come to aught with those two stout-hearts on the watch? And you but a bit ride away? Man, man! if ye wasn't my own dear Faith's daddy, I'd be mad it ye—so I would, now!"

She impulsively touched his damp brow with her red-ripe lips, but John Cromwell caught the glittering tears in her eyes, and knew that she was trying to deceive herself, as well as him.

The faint hope fled from his heart, and the old, sickening doubts came back with redoubled force. The evil face of Trick Purkett seemed to rise before him, grinning like an imp of hades, and a choking groan rose in his throat as he pushed the half-emptied bowl aside, rising to his feet and hoarsely muttering:

"You mean well, girl, and I'll never forget—I can't thank you now, but—pray for my poor wife and Faith!"

"So I will, the night, and better still in the morning, daddy!" Molly replied, bearing him company as he hurried to where the nearest horse was preparing. "I'll ride over to laugh with Faith at your baseless fears—so I will, now!"

"Does that look like it?" and John Cromwell pointed toward the swell over which his trail led, down which a cowboy was now to be seen under the light of the moon, racing at full speed toward them, wildly swinging his hat as he came, though his panting speech was indistinct. "Do you know what that means?" his voice growing hard, his face setting like that of a marble statue, his dark eyes glowing redly, now that he knew the worst.

He caught the reins from the Shamrock hand, leaping into the saddle and sending spurs rowel deep into the flanks of the spirited animal, thundering away from the spot without another word. Past the pale-faced cowboy who swerved aside at his coming, never stopping to ask what he had discovered. Breasting the slope, sending his red spurs home at each bound his snorting steed made.

"Clean crazy!" panted Jerry Fits, staring after the Roundhead with wide eyes and drooping jaw.

"Mount and follow, men!" sharply cried Molly, her face white as that of a corpse, but her voice clear, her great eyes flashing fire. "Mount and ride—ride for life—ride to save life! Kill the dumb beasts if ye must, but save them—*save Faith and her mother!*"

She saw the Roundhead reach the crest, and saw him wrench up his frightened steed for an instant. She saw him reel dizzily in the saddle, and she hardly needed the warning cry of the cowboy:

"Fire—Rump Ranch is burning, mates!"

Only for a single instant did John Cromwell hold his tortured beast in check. That was time sufficient for him to note another blood-red beacon painting the sky, this time in the southeast. And as he saw that his worst fears were surely being confirmed, he sent his red spurs into those bleeding sides, and giving his horse loose rein, thundered over the prairie, riding for more than life!

Not a moan, not a groan escaped his blanched lips. His face was that of a corpse as he stared intently at that steadily rising fan of blood. The time for outward emotion had passed along with doubt. Now he knew what was before him.

And yet, his torture was even more intense than if he could have given it, partial vent in cries, in prayers, or even curses on the cunning rascal whose arts had lured him from the side of his loved ones.

If he could have been there to defend their precious lives! If he could have been there to share their fate! Anything but this!

And he had stopped in his generous race to give aid and comfort to that cunning devil!

He had even bidden him try to regain the ranch, where his hurts might be looked after by his wife and daughter!

And all the time Trick Purkett was planning him evil!

John Cromwell never once glanced behind him to see if he was being followed by his men. He never gave them a thought as he pressed his good steed to its utmost. All he thought of was his loved ones in dire peril, and how he might the soonest cover those terribly long miles which stretched between him and—what?

Were they still alive? Had they escaped that terrible fire?

Could he wish it, when the alternative was their captivity in such hands as those of Trick Purkett?

After him raced his men, and the men from the Pea Jay Ranch, but with all their efforts it was all they could do to keep him in sight.

"He'll never reach home on a live beastie!" muttered Austin McFarland, his shaggy brows wrinkling as inclination struggled with a sense of duty. "Ye'll pick him up with a broken neck, I'm fearing, neebors!"

He rode on a few score rods further, then abruptly exclaimed:

"I've got to do it, don't ye see, man? It racks the heart o' me sorely, but—I'm left in charge, ye understand! I must obey duty first!"

He gave a signal to his men, and veered sharply to the right, now heading direct for the Pea Jay, calling out hoarsely:

"If I find all right there, I'll be with ye as quick as good horseflesh can cover the ground, neebors!"

There was no response. White-faced, their jaws firmly set, the cowboys of Rump Ranch sped on in chase of their master, fearing the worst.

John Cromwell saw, knew nothing of all this. Staring with bloodshot eyes at that red glow, he mechanically spurred his frothing steed over the prairie. For him, the world held only two beings: his wife and daughter.

Would he be in time to save them? Would he be too late to do more than vow a terrible vengeance over their calcined bones?

Over and over again those two questions flashed through his heated brain, but he never tried to answer them, even in thought. The time had not yet come for that.

He was so blind to all else that he failed to comprehend how madly he was overtasking his good horse. When it stumbled, he simply tightened the rein and plunged his dripping spurs deeper into its quivering flanks. All his usual tact was forgotten, though ordinarily few horse men could ride more cunning than he. All he saw was that red light. All he knew was that his loved ones were in peril. All he wished was to annihilate space the more swiftly.

He had left his men far behind, but he gave them no thought. Not even when his horse, with a choking groan, flung up its head and tail, the hot blood gushing from its open mouth as it plunged blindly forward. He simply freed his feet from the stirrups and saved himself from an ugly fall when the poor brute plunged headlong with a bursted blood-vessel.

Only a single glance did he give the dying creature. Just long enough to assure himself that its powers were spent, and then he raced at full speed over the prairie, his gaze still riveted on that death-beacon.

It was well that the mad race was so near an end, else John Cromwell might have shared the fate of his borrowed steed. He was not built for running, and already the blood seemed bursting his skull, but he never gave that a thought. He rushed on at the top of his speed, though a saner man must have recognized the utter uselessness of such headlong haste.

For now the blazing ranch was before his eyes, its roof-tree already fallen, its walls but little more than a fiery skeleton. There were no moving figures about it. That red glare would have betrayed a rat, even!

Even had that bare, open space been filled with stirring shapes, with armed and vicious foemen, John Cromwell would never have recognized it or them, for his vision was blurred, nothing but a horrible red mist floated before his almost bursting eyeballs—nothing but a whirling, tumbling, frothing sea of blood!

He was staggering like a drunken man now, but he kept his feet and he kept moving, though his breath came in scorching gasps and his head swayed unsteadily, as though loosening on his shoulders.

Distanced until the poor horse fell in its tracks, the cowboys rapidly gained on their employer as he raced along on his own feet. They were now close enough to see how blindly he was staggering on, and one of their number gave vent to the mutual fear in the words:

"Ketch him! Kill your critters, pard, but ketch him—or he'll hunt the pore wimmen right in the middle o' that fire!"

There was truth in this dread, for the blinded Roundhead staggered straight toward that glowing mass of ruins. He tried to shout aloud the names of his loved ones, but only a hoarse, inarticulate sound escaped his parched and

bleeding throat. Straight toward the ruins—and even when friendly arms were flung about his shivering form, dragging him back from death, even as his garments began to scorch, he feebly but desperately fought against rescue!

CHAPTER XIV.

CHARGED WITH FOULEST TREACHERY.

FIERCELY, but briefly. Then, with a choking, shivering moan, the over-tasked man gave way, falling a limp and nerveless weight in the arms of the cowboy who had barely saved him from death by fire.

"Lend a hand, pard!" the fellow gasped, staggering under that heavy weight, temporarily weakened as he was by long excitement.

Even as he spoke, aid came, the cowboys leaping to the ground and assisting him in bearing the Roundhead to the pump. John Cromwell was laid on the ground, and cold water liberally sprinkled into his flushed face. His breathing was of an apoplectic nature, but he was not to die then nor thus.

One after another, just as the varying powers of their mounts had sprung them out in that mad race, the cowboys came up. One or two hastened to where the Roundhead lay, eager to learn his fate, but their glad shouts relieved the fears of the others, and they turned to investigating the ruins and the cause of the fire.

A sharp cry from those examining the dead bodies lying around—for Javelina Juan had left his dead behind him, as too valueless for transportation, or even burial!—called all about a body which gave feeble signs of life.

It lay so near the fire that its clothes were charred and blackened. Its hair was crisped to the skull. Its face scorched and shrunken out of all semblance to humanity. And yet there was a spark of life remaining, and kindly hands caught and dragged the repulsive object further away, while others brought water and poured over it.

One cowboy bent close over the body, but started back with an oath as its eyes opened with a sightless stare.

"It's the devil—Trick Purkett!" he snarled, venomously.

"It's all his work! Pitch him in the fire he kindest!"

Rude, vengeful hands fastened upon the crippled wretch, and another instant would have seen him hurled into that glowing mass of coals. But a hoarse voice—the voice of John Cromwell—checked them.

"He must tell—whose hand wrought all this?"

"I'll tell—I'll—Javelina—river—"

Trick Purkett seemed to recognize that voice, altered though it was, and he eagerly lifted himself on his scorched hands to greet the man for whose coming he had kindled that fire. For this meeting he had so desperately fought back death. For this, and for revenge on the pitiless villains who, when he could no longer serve them, had doomed him to a dog's death.

"Where are they? My women-folk? Speak, or I'll kill you by inches!" hoarsely panted the Roundhead, bending over the dying wretch as his arms yielded to the weight of his body and his face struck the ground.

"Gone—carried to—Wild Hog—"

That was all! A gush of black blood choked the wretch. He struggled to lift his head. He fought desperately against death, hoping to live long enough to make his vengeance more sure; but fate was against him, as it had been ever since that avenging shot, sped by the hand of the honest cowboy whom he had so ruthlessly decoyed to his doom, bored its way so close to his treacherous heart.

The vain struggle ceased. Trick Purkett was dead.

It was long before John Cromwell could bring himself to believe this. In his own arms he bore the miserable carcass to the pump, and with his own hands he bathed that scorched face, hoping to learn more definitely the fate which had overtaken his loved ones.

When, at length, he was forced to give over his vain efforts to bring back life, his bodily powers suddenly failed him. Gently his men bore him away to a couch of hay, one of them remaining by his side while the rest—

When their work was done, the corpse of Trick Purkett had vanished from sight, but a black, greasy smoke was curling up from the deepest mass of embers on the spot where had stood the Rump Ranch!

Then they went about less disagreeable work, reading the sign so plentifully scattered over the desolated premises. They rescued the ghastly remnant which, by his belt-buckle and the blade of a knife, they identified as all that was left of poor Joe McCord, reverently placing it beside his murdered partner, Harry Brooks, in the stable.

Then, as they lacked a leader for the present, they silently dug a grave into which, with uncovered heads and moist eyes, they placed the two bodies, covering them from sight forever.

"They was white. They done thar duty until death coppered 'em!"

Such was the funeral sermon.

They were thus engaged when Austin Mc-

Farland, with half a dozen men from the Pea Jay Ranch, rode up on panting steeds.

Nothing was wrong at his ranch, and only leaving a couple of men to act as guard, the canny Scot had ridden hard on fresh mounts to lend such aid to the stricken rancher as lay in his power.

"I can't see clear through it," he hastily muttered to the cowboys, uncovering in respect to the grave and its contents. "Sonora was gone, with master's best horse, but he did nothing worse. Yet he must have been mixed up in this vile plot!"

Asking where John Cromwell was, after hearing what Trick Purkett had uttered before death cut his voice short, the foreman squatted by the side of the Roundhead, uttering what consolation he could.

"It's bad enough, God knows, neebor!" he muttered, his gaunt face full of sympathy as he looked into that sadly altered countenance. "But it might have been worse. Even such devils as they are wouldn't dare do bodily injury to such tender beings!"

John Cromwell made no reply. He lay motionless, his eyes open, his breathing natural, but like one completely deprived of muscular powers.

Until the rapid clattering of hoofs on the hard ground: until the clear, ringing tones of a new-comer's voice smote upon his ears:

"Who has done this foul deed? Where are—the women-folk?"

"God save us!" ejaculated McFarland, amazed. "It's the master!"

With one sweep of his arm, John Cromwell hurled the Scot backward at sprawling length on the hay. Like a lion he sprung to his feet, his bodily powers seemingly fully restored, his deep-sunken eyes blazing with a deadly light as he strode forth and confronted the speaker.

"And those questions again, Paul Joyce," he slowly, coldly uttered as the new-comer started back a pace at his approach. "Ask them of me—and while you ask, look me squarely in the eyes!"

Involuntarily as it seemed to others, Paul Joyce dropped one hand to a pistol-butt at his waist as he met that blazing gaze of darkest suspicion, but he quickly rallied, though his voice was far from steady as he uttered:

"I do ask you—my heavens, man! why should I not meet your eyes while asking what has befallen the one—your daughter?"

If this was acting, the master of Pea Jay Ranch was letter perfect in the part he had assumed. And of all those looking on, only the grim Roundhead doubted his honesty, judging from their faces.

Tall, athletic in figure, yet lithe and graceful in every motion, Paul Joyce was a remarkably handsome man in face as well. His skin was dark, in keeping with his close-cropped, jetty hair and slight mustache, but his skin was smooth and his complexion perfect. His eyes were large, black as sloes', and now filled with intense anxiety, mingled with just a touch of anger that, at such a time, the stubborn dislike of this man should come uppermost. His features were clean-cut and regular, without a suspicion of effeminacy.

His garb was that of a well-to-do rancher, of good material but devoid of anything flashy. His shirt was of fine flannel, laced in front with a silken cord, its broad collar lying over a scarlet neckerchief. His pantaloons were thrust into the tops of riding-boots which came above his knees, dusty and showing hard riding, as did the redened spurs at his heels.

About his waist was a belt of webbing, filled with cartridges and supporting a brace of heavy revolvers, with the pearl haft of a knife gleaming in the ruddy glow of the ruins.

Surely this was not the face of so foul of traitor?

But it needed more than a handsome face and a glib tongue to remove the doubts of a man so fixed in his opinions as John Cromwell, and his cold tones grew still harder as he made reply:

"Because I believe that your hand is at the bottom of all this! Because I believe that you have wrought me the foulest wrong mortal man ever suffered!"

Paul Joyce stared into that flushed face for a single breath, then glanced swiftly over the men standing around, muttering hoarsely:

"Is he crazy? Has this fearful blow really turned his brain?"

"Speak to me, Paul Joyce," sharply but still coldly uttered the Roundhead, before any one else could make response. "I charge you with bringing about that awful work. I charge you with stealing away my wife and my daughter."

"When I would have gladly—so gladly, Heaven is my witness!" with a fleeting glance upward before completing his sentence. "When I would have laid down my life to spare her a single pang! When my dearest hope in life was to win and wear her as my wife? Man, you are mad!"

Sharply, almost fiercely came those final words, and once more the young rancher dropped hand to his revolver.

"Go slow, pardner!" sternly warned one of

the Rump cowboys, while he and his mates also touched weapons.

"Peace, ye devils!" flashed McFarland, reaching the side of his employer, a wave of his hand bringing the Pea Jay men together. "Haven't ye had bloody murder enough for one night? Will ye fly at the throats of all who come to lend ye a helping hand?"

John Cromwell reached out his mighty arm and brushed the Scot aside, as though he had been nothing more than a child. He never even vouchsafed the foreman a glance, his blazing orbs remaining riveted on that pale, handsome countenance the while.

"You ask me why you should do this foul deed? Because you thought to steal what you failed to win by less brutal means, Paul Joyce. Because I drove you from the home you tried to despoil. Because you hoped to kill me by dealing such a monstrous blow, and fearing to strike me while my face was turned toward you."

"You are crazed by what has happened, John Cromwell," was the reply, delivered with forced composure. "I swear to you by all that men hold sacred, I am innocent of wronging you or yours, even in my most secret thoughts! I have just reached this section after— Bah!" with a short, hard laugh as he partly turned away. "I am nearly as mad as you, to even notice such an unfounded charge!"

"It is a charge, Paul Joyce," still in that horribly cold, even tone of voice, so much more impressive than the hottest rage. "I still believe your hand is at the bottom of this foul treachery, even if you did not actually share in the bloody outrage. And so believing—listen to me, Paul Joyce," his heavy hand falling on the young rancher's shoulder, and facing him until their eyes fairly met.

"In time the whole truth will come out. God is too just to keep it covered for long! And then—if you are the guilty demon I firmly believe, I swear by heaven and earth and hell itself, to fully avenge my wrongs! Black as is this job, my reprisal shall be still blacker!"

"Have you done, John Cromwell?" slowly, coldly asked Joyce, unflinchingly meeting those coldly blazing eyes.

"I have said my say. I have warned you what you have to expect if there is guilt at your heart, Paul Joyce."

Then that enforced composure was shattered. Then that cold waiting came to an end, and the accused flashed into hot denial:

"You are mad, John Cromwell! If not—but you are the father of the maiden whom I love even better than my own pride! That saves you, where I'd have laid another dead at my feet for one-tenth part of the shameful insults you have flung into my face! Hold—you have had your say, and now it is my turn.

"I could prove my innocence to even your satisfaction, John Cromwell, but it would degrade me in my own estimation to stoop so low after all you have said. I will say this much to your face, however:

"I love your daughter, even as you claim to love her. Now let's see how true your love is—let's see if you will accept her word as proof of my innocence! I'll never know rest until she is restored to your arms, to tell you that—in your madness—you have foully lied in charging this black night's work against me!"

CHAPTER XV.

REGISTERING AN OATH.

JOHN CROMWELL listened in silence until the Pea Jay master came to an end, maintaining that intense gaze through all, outwardly far more composed than the young man whom he accused of such foul treachery. But the big veins were beginning to swell upon his temples. His hands were slowly clinching. There was a white circle widening around his lips, and a pinched look coming to his nostrils.

As Paul Joyce ceased speaking, the right hand of the Roundhead rose with a hotly passionate gesture, and his deep tones rung out menacingly:

"You have my warning, Paul Joyce, where a less honest man would have opened your black heart to inspection at a single stroke! Go your way before you drive me to complete madness. Keep out of my sight. I ask none—I'll accept none of your aid. If you are guilty, as I believe before high heaven! keep out of my reach while you can!"

"If I were guilty, would I be here now?" impatiently cried Joyce.

"If you are guilty, arrange your earthly affairs while you can, for this world is all too small for you and I both to live in it."

Paul Joyce turned away from that white, hard face, his own devoid of color as his eyes swiftly ranged over the other men present. In that glance he seemed to be reading the verdict for or against him, and the result was about what might have been expected.

Austin McFarland and the little squad of men from the Pea Jay Ranch plainly sided with him, while it was just as clear to be seen that those owing allegiance to the Rump Ranch shared its master's doubts and suspicions to a greater or less degree.

Faces were dark, eyes were flashing, hands

were touching weapons, and it would require only the tiniest sort of spark to bring on an explosion which must prove fatal to the majority of the men thus arrayed at such close quarters.

A sound that was not easy to interpret—a curious blending of laughter with an oath—dropped from the young man's lips as he sharply motioned his men to fall back.

"Hands empty, ye hot-heads!" he sternly cried. "If you're so hungry for fighting, follow the trail left by the Wild Hog."

"Under you, sir, we'll be only too glad o' the chance," promptly responded McFarland, but the rancher had already turned from them to the men of Rump Ranch, his tones growing steadier, colder, yet more intense as they shaped the words:

"You have heard what John Cromwell had to say, gentlemen, and in common justice I ask you to hear my answer. I hold no grudge against him, for it's only too evident that this awful blow has turned his brain for the hour, and I know he believes what he charges against me. Only for that— But I can bear up under it."

"Go your way, Paul Joyce, while the path is open!"

"I say I can bear up under it, for I know that the day will come when John Cromwell must beg my pardon as publicly as he has hurled his foul insults into my face!"

He turned sharply upon the Roundhead, adding coldly:

"I am going, John Cromwell. I offer you the services of my men, if you will accept them. I will send you a supply of good horses as soon as word can reach my ranch. Try to forget that they come from a man whom you have tried to crush beneath the weight of your hatred, and use them for the sake of your dear ones."

"Will you go? Are you determined to make me kill you?"

"I am going. Only one word more. You shall never look upon my face again until I bring a witness of my innocence whom not even your mad brain can impeach!"

His right hand went up as if to register this oath, then Paul Joyce strode swiftly to where his good horse stood waiting, leaping into the saddle and dashing off through the night.

Austin McFarland hesitated, glancing from the Roundhead after his employer, then back again, evidently sorely perplexed and at a loss to choose his proper course.

John Cromwell saw this, and in cold, even tones he said:

"Go after him, neighbor. It's your duty. We can get along without your help, I reckon."

"The deevil's in it all, the night!" harshly cried the foreman of the Pea Jay, smiting the air with his clinched fist. "I'll go—but it's an evil tongue, that o' yours, neebor. Pray Heaven it hasn't helped to dig a grave for your women! I'll go, as ye bid, and as duty calls me, but I'll come back—duty or no duty!"

John Cromwell caught that bony hand between his, pressing it warmly, a faint smile flickering across his white, hard-set features.

"I can thank you, McFarland, for you're honest and true, if you do serve a scoundrel, whose heart is black as the lowest pits of Tophet. I do thank you, but I can get along without your help. If I knew the lives of my loved ones hung on his aid, I couldn't— God pity us all!"

He broke down, turning away to hide the hot moisture that leaped into his aching eyes. He could face one whom he hated even as he suspected him, but the honest sympathy which he saw in that bony, freckled, homely countenance broke him down.

After all, he was but the pitiful wreck of his usual self, just then, and no one more fully realized it than he did himself.

"The deevil tak' my duty!" spluttered McFarland, snuffing back his own tears vigorously as he wildly motioned his men to mount and away. "Sin' all ta' others are goin' daft, I'll even play false mesel'! Mount, ye deevils, an' spread ta' tidings! 'Rouse the hale—"

"You too, McFarland," interposed the Roundhead, checking the wildly excited Scot. "Go to your duty, man. I can take no help from Paul Joyce while my heart is so full of black doubts against him. But—you can send word of this outrage to your neighbors, bidding them gather here or strike the trail as soon as possible."

With another firm grip of that bony hand, Cromwell turned away toward the ruins of his home, and one of his men hurriedly added:

"It's best that way, I reckon, Mack. We're enough to do the work here, and you can't help us more than by spreading the news, as he said. Tell 'em to pick their best stock, and to fetch along a relay."

"I'll do it," nodded the Scot, regaining something of his usual composure. "Look you to him, man! No mortal can bear up long against such a terrible strain."

The cowboy nodded gravely, hurrying to the side of his employer, half-expecting him to stalk straight into that glowing mass.

"Will I send the boys off to hunt up help, boss?" he said, keeping close guard over the Roundhead, into whose face had returned some-

thing of that first dull, paralyzing shock. "We could pick up the trail easy enough, if they've gone the same way as the stock, but—well, we're a mighty small army to crowd close on the heels of the Wild Hogs."

John Cromwell gave a start, staring stupidly for a brief space into that face, as though he heard but failed to comprehend what he meant. It was only another proof how terribly that black night's work had broken him down.

"Leave it all to us, boss," quickly added the cowboy, one hand closing on the arm of his employer, the other making a sign behind his back which was promptly answered by a couple of his mates coming to the spot. "You're all broke up with that run, and—"

John Cromwell cut him short with a sharp laugh, shaking off his grasp, tossing back his head as though he could thus cast aside the strange weakness which had settled over him for the time.

"Not so bad as that, Vanduzen," he said, his tones almost like himself again. "I've no time to waste in idle grief while my folk are in sore need of aid."

"We feel just the same way, boss, but we didn't have the run you took, and what'll become o' the poor ma'am and the little daughter if you should happen to break down? We're good to work, but we want a cool and clear head to mark out the way we're to take, don't ye see? And that's why I beg of ye to try and take a little rest, leaving the first rough work to us boys. If you could catch even a cat-nap, now!"

The brain of the sorely-stricken man was surely clearing, for he nodded assent to this reasoning, turning away from the ruins and pausing by the pump, plunging his head into the tub, holding it there until Vanduzen feared he would suffocate. But at the touch of that hand, Cromwell lifted his head, shaking off the dripping water as a dog clears its coat, his voice ringing out more naturally:

"That cools my brain, and you need fear no further for my wits, good fellow! Call up the men, please."

The cowboy lifted his hand, for there was no regular summons necessary, since all the men were within sight, curiously, anxiously waiting the result.

In sharp, clear tones the Roundhead gave them their instructions.

"You know what to say, men. You know that the Wild Hog is at the bottom of all this. Go spread the word, and say that John Cromwell will be indebted for life to all who answer his appeal for help. Bid them meet at this place, all from above. Those further down had best strike the trail at an angle."

"Bid each man pick his best horse, leading it while he rides another to change off when the trail is fairly taken. Of course I'll be responsible for all damages; that goes without saying."

With these general instructions, he gave each man a particular ranch to visit first. From there, they were to return, while the owner would readily send the black tidings further abroad.

He made no mention of either the Pea Jay or the Shamrock, for he knew well enough that Jerry Fits would require no further warning, and he had already disposed of the other ranch.

By this time Vanduzen had lost all fears for his employer, so far as self-destruction was concerned. Though sadly altered during those past few hours, the Roundhead was plainly clear-brained once more.

"I'll wait for you here, lads," Cromwell said in parting. "I'll try to rest in body—for their sakes!"

The cowboys mounted their tired horses, for the Wild Hog had plainly made a clean sweep of all the corralled animals, and there was no time to waste in hunting up the half-wild, loose horses on the range. They rode away rapidly, leaving the Roundhead alone to his thoughts.

Those must have been bitter enough, in all conscience, but outwardly he made little show of the fact. Cold, steady, silent, he walked around the ruins, gazing at the spot where the carcass of Trick Purkett lay in a winding-sheet of coals. If there were curses in his heart on the foul treachery of this rascal, his face gave no signs.

He passed to and fro over the beaten ground, looking for signs by which he might gain some clew to the number of his enemy, or the disposal made of his loved ones; and he was thus engaged when, half an hour later, he was startled by the slow tread of a horse.

The moon gave light enough for him to almost instantly recognize one of the men whom he had dispatched to rouse the country, and a dark frown flashed across his face as he sharply hailed him:

"What are you doing here, Dan Titus?"

"Boss—I come back—for to say—"

The fellow stammered, his voice seeming to choke. And as he rode up where the Roundhead could distinguish his features, an awful fear assailed the rancher, for the cowboy was almost ghastly pale, his eyes restless, his tongue moistening his lips as though they were parched.

"What is it? What have you discovered?" hoarsely demanded the Roundhead, springing to his side as the man alighted from his horse.

"I cain't—ef you'll come—it's only over to the patch o' bresh yender, an'—"

The Roundhead waited for no more definite information, but strode off nearly due east, closely followed by Dan Titus, also on foot.

Neither man spoke a word until the little motte of trees and low growth was nearly gained, then the cowboy sprung past his employer, one trembling hand parting the leafy screen, motioning Cromwell to enter.

"What is it?" hoarsely demanded the rancher, glancing into that white, scared visage. "Not—not my—"

"I cain't—look fer yourself, boss!" was the husky response.

John Cromwell stooped to enter under the stiff boughs, but as he did so Dan Titus swung up his right hand, gripping a clubbed pistol, and dealt him a terrible blow that felled him like an ox in the shambles!

CHAPTER XVI.

IN THE JAWS OF THE WILD HOG.

WHEN life and reason came back to John Cromwell after that treacherous blow from the hand that he trusted, the nearly full moon was shedding its soft light fairly into his face through an opening in the tree-tops.

He strove to rise, but in vain. His limbs seemed wholly without life or sensation. He tried to cry out, but his voice stopped in his throat as though his mouth had been securely sealed. And with his brain dizzily whirling, he was beginning to dimly wonder if he was not dead, when a dark face suddenly appeared directly above him.

Out from it flashed eyes of fire. Down from it came a hot breath as a low, mocking laugh rung through his ears.

The truth flashed upon him in that single instant. He knew that Dan Titus had betrayed him, that he was bound and gagged, helplessly in the power of his bitter enemies!

He tried to spring to his feet, and did succeed in lifting his body to a sitting posture; only to be forced back by the foot of the man who had laughed so viciously in his face.

"Not so fast, John Cromwell!" came a harsh, mocking voice to his ears, as that booted foot pressed him hard against the earth. "You must learn to creep before you can hope to walk—to creep and crawl and humble yourself in the dust beneath my feet!"

One desperate effort to burst his bonds convinced him of his complete helplessness, and then the Roundhead lay still, glaring up into that shadowed face, trying to recognize its owner.

That foot was removed, and its owner squatted down by the Roundhead's side, face still shadowed by the broad sombrero which was pulled to his jetty brows.

"You are not altogether an idiot, John Cromwell," his captor added, his fingers nimbly rolling up a cigarette the while. "Not quite an ass, though you blundered blindly enough into this little snare. The clumsy dog!" with brief venom, as he struck a match and sheltered it inside his hollowed palms before touching the flame to his cigarette. "His is the hand of a pile-driver! Precious time has been wasted in calling you back to life—for a time I feared you were converted into an angel!"

With quick, short puffs he ignited his tobacco, and Cromwell caught sight of a deep-lined, yellow face, but one which he failed to recognize if it had ever before come within his range of vision.

"Is it so, Roundhead?" laughed the fellow, mockingly. "You are curious to recognize an old friend? Well, be patient; the time will come all too soon for your peace of mind, it may be!"

"And yet—why not? Why should I seek to keep you in doubt, even for a minute? There is none, and so—behold me, Javelina Juan!"

He pushed back his sombrero, leaning over his captive, puffing rapidly at his cigar until a red glow was cast over his features.

It was the Wild Hog, beyond a doubt, though the face seemed entirely strange to the Roundhead. That thin, deep-lined visage; those jetty eyes, flashing with venomous hatred from their deep sockets; the thin lips, curling back from those white, gleaming teeth; all formed a picture such as one would naturally expect in a character like the Wild Hog.

"Still blind?" laughed Javelina Juan, his tones abruptly changing, growing soft and even musical for the moment. "You have forgotten, John Cromwell? The past is dead with you! But not buried too deep for resurrection!" and once more it was the harsh, disagreeable tones of the Wild Hog.

He dashed the burning cigar into the upturned face with a force that shattered its envelope, and for the time blinded the Roundhead in reality. And through that smarting darkness echoed his voice:

"Yes, you helpless reptile squirming beneath my foot! Yes, I am Javelina Juan—I am the Wild Hog of the Rio Grande! And I am the one to whom you owe all your trials and sufferings this night! To me you owe it all, dog, son of a dog!"

"It was my gold that corrupted Trick Purkett and Sonora Sam and Dan Titus! It was by my

orders that you were lured away to chase a false beacon—kindled through love of my money! It was my men who killed your guards, who carried away your wife and your daughter! It was my tool who fired your home, though that was not on the programme; the crippled cur acted on his own responsibility there, and I could not prevent him—the warning came too late for that!

"All this is the work of my hands, the fruit of my brains, John Cromwell! And why? Why should I hate you so bitterly? Why should I doom your women-folk to such a fate? Do you ask these questions in your heart—your black, pitiless heart of ice?"

As though spurred to fury beyond the power of speech to express, Javelina Juan flashed forth a gleaming knife and quivered it close above those blood-shot eyes, seeming about to put out their light forever!

"Not now, John Cromwell," he abruptly added, replacing the weapon and falling back to his former easy position. "Not until I have told you something of my reasons for doing this little bit of work.

"It is a long, weary stretch to glance back across, John Cromwell, but the trail is very familiar to my brain. I could not begin to number the times I have traversed it in fancy! Listen: you shall make the trip with me this night! Not foot by foot, inch by inch, as I have so often passed over the blasted track, but with one great leap. See! we are at its beginning already!"

Again came that marvelous change in the outlaw's tones. Once more that cold venom vanished. Once more music took the place of harsh discord.

"Does the surroundings look familiar to your eyes, John? Do you recognize the flowers, the trees, the vines and creepers? Does your ear catch the soft music of the birds? Do you hear the little fountain and its tinkling waters as they fall in drops like diamonds into the marble basin? And more—can you distinguish that voice—the low, sweet, merry yet sad voice of—whose face is that, John Cromwell?"

From music to discord once more, with bewildering rapidity!

"You do—I see it in your face, heart-of-ice! You do—you have not wholly forgotten, during all these years. So much the better. It will spare me breath. It will save me time. As for you—well, you shall at least have time enough in which to breathe a prayer, for those you love now, if not for your own evil self."

"I, too, remember that voice. I, too, can see the fair young girl, even as your blasting gaze first rested upon her in her Southern home. Ah, so well do I remember! So well—too well for you, black-heart!"

"She was so happy, so innocent, so pure and precious in all eyes save yours, John Cromwell. And yet—perhaps I wrong you in saying so much. Perhaps you also prized her as she deserved, then! If you had only continued to trust her as you began!"

"And yet you never knew her worth, even when you poured your mock honey into her willing ears, else the ending would have been different. If she had only hearkened to the warnings of her elders! But it was to be—so much the worse for her—so much the worse for you, John Cromwell!"

"She was shy—a very bird of the wildwood! She fluttered long and led you a merry chase for a time, John Cromwell. If it had only been longer! If her friends had only learned of your pursuit earlier! If I—but what matter? Time has past for all such idle regrets, and now the time has come for retribution, black heart of ice!"

"Those who would have saved her, were blind too long. The man who would have cheerfully made a carpet of his life-blood for her feet, was detained far away, until the evil was wrought. Then—what could he do? Eat his heart out in silence! Nothing more was left him—then!"

"She was snared, this pretty wild bird with the music under her little tongue. She was lured—you were a rarely skillful fowler in those days of old, John Cromwell."

"There were hot and stormy scenes when the little bird flutteringly chirped her dream of love to the parent birds, but the end—you and I know only too well what that ending was, John Cromwell. You and I know how you pleaded, how you swore to love and cherish and care for that little bird of nature—that warm-hearted daughter of the sun. You and I know how, aided by her tears, her sobs, her frantic prayers, the victory was won, and the vows spoken—do you remember them, heart of ice?" leaning forward and viciously tapping the gagged lips of the helpless Roundhead.

"Do you remember how those vows were broken? Have you forgotten that, dog of dogs, cur of all curs? If so—let me remind you."

"Broken within the second year. Broken—and for what? Because your poor little child-wife smiled upon another man. Simply smiled, no more than that. A smile—and you drove it from her poor face with curses. You banished it, to give place to the red lines left by your brutal fingers. Struck her poor cheek—the cheek on which your first love-kiss dropped as

she shyly turned her eyes from the love-light in yours.

"And then—well, it is hard to tell such a story, even after all these long years. Then—the day came when you dealt another blow, with something harder, more cruel than your open hand. *With a knife!*"

CHAPTER XVII.

TRYING TO FAN DEAD EMBERS.

JAVELINA JUAN drew back with a shiver, visible even by that dim and uncertain light. A yellow hand was pressed across his eyes, as though to shut out the picture his own tongue was drawing.

But only for a brief space. Almost before the bound and tongue locked Roundhead could ask himself in thought what connection this red-handed marauder could have with those long-past days, the Wild Hog was once more bending over him, speaking rapidly, more dramatically:

"Ay! John Cromwell—with a knife, only less sharp than your cruel tongue with which you stabbed that poor child to her heart of heart—stabbed her until she hardly felt the cold steel as it opened a passage for the angel of death to enter! And for what? Once more, for nothing—worse than nothing!"

"Was it her fault if there are hearts where love can never die, even among those of your sex, John Cromwell? Was she to blame if the man to whom her hand had been pledged while yet an infant, as it were, and whose bride she would contentedly have become, only for your coming into that little paradise; was it fault of hers, I ask you, John Cromwell, that this true lover of old should chance to find her there? Was it her fault if his great loss drew hot words from his lips—brought tears to her eyes and choked up her little throat until she could not right away chide his vain passion and remind him that she was another's wife? Was it—Bah!" with a passionate outflinging of one hand and rising to his feet, removing his hat as though in hopes the night-air might cool his heated brain.

He paced back and forth across the little opening, gesticulating wildly at times, muttering barely above his breath, the sounds reaching the ears of his captive, yet without conveying any knowledge.

Who was this strange being? What interest had he in that long-turned page of the past? Could it be that he was the man for whom Javelina Juan's "little song bird" had betrayed her husband?

"Is it so, John?" suddenly uttered the Wild Hog, pausing by the side of the helpless Roundhead, bending over as though to read his secret thoughts in his face. "You are marveling who am I, that I know so much of your past? Well, why not?"

There was doubt, hesitation, in the muttered query, and the Wild Hog seemed to be fighting a battle with himself.

John Cromwell stared up into the face of his captor, a ray of truth beginning to steal through the mental mist. Surely—and yet, it could not be! With his own hand he had driven death to that false, fickle heart! With his own eyes he had looked upon the grass-grown grave where that fair form had long since turned to dust!

His brain seemed whirling drunkenly, and that dark figure before his eyes danced and swayed like some fantastic shadow of the night.

"Is it so, John Cromwell?" a voice came indistinctly to his ears. "Have your blind eyes opened to the truth at last? Do you know now who I am—who I was in the long ago?"

The shadow bent closer over him, and then a rush of air filled his laboring lungs as the painful gag was removed from his acting jaws.

This simple fact drove away those dizzy fancies, and as by magic the Roundhead was himself again, looking into the dark eyes of the Wild Hog, whose face was almost touching his, whose hot breath fanned his cheek as the additional words came:

"I meant not to take this step so soon, John. I thought to hide my secret from your eyes until the end—until you had suffered something of what you made me suffer—until you had in part atoned for that bitter black past! But—is it so strange, John? Is it incredible that a woman's heart should relent, even in the very moment of victory? That she should dash aside her cup of vengeance just as it fairly touches her lips—the lips which have hungered and thirsted for the bitter yet precious draught through all these weary years? Can you not comprehend why this should be, John Cromwell?"

It was a curious blending of fierce rage with tender longing. It was as though two altogether different persons were using one organ, each striving for the mastery, but neither able to wholly subdue the other. There seemed curses and caresses blending in that voice!

"I know—you are—you was—Juanita Sandoval!"

Breakenly came the words, but it was solely because of his parched throat and stiffened jaws that refused to obey his will with ordinary smoothness, rather than strong emotion; but

the Wild Hog plainly misinterpreted what she heard. Even through the gloom her dark eyes took on a softer glow, and as though without her own knowledge, one hand softly touched the Roundhead's cheek. A cold shiver crept over him at this caress; for such it surely was.

"Yes, I am Juanita Sandoval, John," the Wild Hog replied, that old music coming back to her voice once more. "I thought to lead you on to death's door before telling you this. I thought to keep my secret intact up to the moment when your awful tortures should make you pray for death or madness to relieve your overtired brain. But—I am still a woman, John! And I find my heart still alive, after all!"

Lower bent that dark face, and the Roundhead closed his eyes, turning his own away as far as his cramped position would allow. For the moment he fancied that those thin, tigerish lips meant to touch his!

"You shiver and shrink from me, John?" softly muttered the strange being, shrinking back in turn, a tinge of bitterness mingling with the reproach in her musical notes. "Time was when I used to have that all to myself, John! Time was when you had to plead and coax for a kiss!"

"When I was a fool, and you were an innocent child!" flashed the Roundhead, turning until their gaze met; hers full of gentle sorrow and mournful reproach, his blazing with renewed hatred and revenge. "When I worshiped the very ground on which your feet left their print, and you loved me—or were you false and frail from the very first? You must have been born thus! I thought it then, when I left you forever! I know it now, when you rise from the grave as—the Wild Hog!"

Shivering, shaking in every limb, Javelina Juan shrunk further from that passion-convulsed face. A low, panting cry followed the harsh laugh which accompanied that title; it was so full of bitter scorn.

But only for a brief space. Barely long enough for him to see that his barbed shaft had sped home. Then the Wild Hog cried, her tones more like the ones she had used when charging him with bitter wrong:

"If I am the Wild Hog, whose work but yours, John Cromwell? Whose heavy hand drove all mercy from my bleeding heart? Yours, John Cromwell! Yours—and even as the blow was falling, I loved you—I loved you so dearly, John!"

The harshness gave way to melancholy music. The angry fire was dimmed by—could it be tears?

If so, they were dashed to nothingness by that bony hand. And once more the strange being grew composed, speaking so rapidly that the Roundhead, still far from being his usual self, found no chance for speedy interruption.

"I never thought to defend myself against your foul suspicions on this side of the grave, John Cromwell! I never thought to ever talk with you as Juanita Sandoval, who gave up home, parents, religion, all and everything, counting herself richly rewarded by a kiss from your lips, by a careless caress from your hands—the hand which, only two brief years later, John! was to drive a cruel blade deep into the bosom on which your head had so often been pillow'd in sleep! Here—right here is the mark of your blade, John Cromwell!"

Those bony, yellow fingers tore open the ruffled shirt, and their owner bent over the prostrate Roundhead for a moment, swaying back once more as his eyes closed and his face turned away.

"You are not *all* ice at heart, then, John?" with a curious laugh that sent a strange thrill crawling through his veins. "You dare not gaze upon the scar of the wound you bestowed upon your wife? Ay!" and her voice rung out more sharply. "Your wife, John Cromwell! In the eyes of heaven, if not in your cold law! Your wife—and man never had a wife more faithful, more loving or true than I was then!"

"Even when you lay so snugly in the arms—"

A sharp stroke cut his sneering sentence short, and with her cold fingers still pressing upon his lips, Javelina added:

"Even then, heart of ice! Now that I have dropped the mask I have worn through all these years, you must listen—you shall learn the whole truth, and realize how bitterly you wronged me then!"

"I was in his arms—yes! He was my old-time lover, before you crossed our path—true! His hot lips were sealing mine—even that I will not deny!"

"It would be hard, even for your lips!" came scorchingly through those claw-like fingers.

"All this I admit, because it is the truth," in the same measured tones, but underneath which lay such strong passion, for all. "I know how you must have felt when you saw me thus. I do not blame you for killing him; if you had not, I could have hated you for a soft-heart! I would have slain him myself, after!"

"After you grew weary of his caresses, as you did mine?"

Again the woman shrunk from that intense scorn, but as before she let it pass without resentment. She seemed bent on gaining a cer-

tain point, and naught he might utter just then could turn her aside.

"He came to me, when I did not know he was within leagues of our then happy home. He came to me and tried to revive the childish affection which I had felt for him, as a family friend, before I met you. He thought it love, as I did at the time, before you taught me the full meaning of that word.

"I chided him, for he was still a tie which connected me with my parents—whom I deserted and left to sorrow, as you know, John Cromwell! As he persisted, I grew angry and threatened him with your vengeance. He laughed—he showed me a knife—he swore that it had already drank your heart's blood!

"Then it was *you* came, John. The awful shock benumbed me—I was like one dead as he clasped me to his heart—I knew his lips were scorching mine, yet I was powerless to desist. I was dead, all but my brain. I swear this to you, by our old love! I swear it by our first love-kiss! By those blissful days when—"

Her voice choked, and strong emotion seemed to paralyze her tongue. She bowed her head, hiding her face in her hands. And through the shadow which had slowly crept over them both during her passionate recital as the moon sailed through the heavens, the Roundhead could see her trembling violently.

Yet the sight awoke naught of pity or remorse in his bosom. He had deemed her guilty through all these long years. He could not believe her innocent now.

Yet there was a touch of probability in all she had said. He had recognized the man in whose arms he found her, as one whom her parents had declared she was pledged unto, when he asked them for their child. It was because of their refusal to break the old bond for a new, that he and Juanita eloped together.

And when he found them thus, he had not stopped to ask its whole purport. He struck them both down in his blind rage, then fled the country in a mad frenzy, never since to touch foot upon Mexican soil.

Swiftly all this passed through his brain, but before he reached the end, the woman recovered herself once more, rapidly uttering:

"Will you not believe me when I take this oath, John? Will you not trust to my truth when I say that I never loved you better than I did in that awful moment when I saw your passion-convulsed face over his shoulder? When I saw you strike the dastardly wretch dead at your feet? Can you not believe me when I swear to you by all mankind holds holy, that I never loved you better, was never more true, never more wholly and entirely your own love, than when I felt your keen blade sinking deep into my bosom?"

"I loved you *then*—I love you *now!*" her voice shaking with powerful emotion as her hands reached out toward him, as though longing to clasp him to her scarred bosom. "Is it in vain? Is it all too late, John? Will the dead embers of your love—for I know you *did* love me in those days! Is it impossible to fan them back to life again? Am I doomed to pass all the rest of my life in this repulsive guise? Am I to remain the Wild Hog until death, or—John, my love! Say that you will bury the past! Say that I plead not all in vain!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

"NOW—I AM THE WILD HOG!"

THERE was no immediate response. Her fierce passion seemed to paralyze the tongue of the Roundhead, and he stared at her shadowy form in silence, too greatly amazed to utter a word.

Juanita Sandoval struck a match and held it close over his face. She bent forward, and tried to read his answer there, by that flickering light, and as she did so, the truth glowed forth from his bloodshot eyes.

With a short, harsh laugh the woman cast the match into his face, springing to her feet with tigerish grace and activity. Sharply the toe of her spurred boot tapped his lips, and there was naught of music in her tones as she uttered, viciously:

"Once again you have defeated me, John Cromwell. Once more you have won. Make the most of your triumph, dog!"

"You are worse than mad to think for even an instant that I could ever love you again, Juanita," coldly uttered the Roundhead.

"I hoped you would, heart-of ice! But not for the reason you have faith in, John Cromwell. I wanted to revive the old love on your side, simply to make my vengeance more perfect. I wanted to have the exquisite delight of spurning you. Of mocking you! Of turning that love to gall on your lips!"

"You were lying all through, then? I more than half-suspected as much," with a cold, yet reckless sneer. "You were ever false, Juanita. You never knew the meaning of the word, truth!"

"You are lying now, John Cromwell," quietly retorted the woman, resuming her former position near him, again rolling up a cigar and lighting it before adding: "I was truthful until long after I knew you. I was pure as an angel until you taught me how delightful it is to sin."

And even in sinning for your sake I remained pure and innocent at heart, since true love can never do wrong.

"What I told you was simple truth. I never had a dream of playing you false, and the explanation of that ugly situation in which you surprised us, that black day, is simply truth itself."

"I did love you still, purely, wholly, soulfully, up to the instant when you stabbed me, to the heart, as you no doubt believed. But when I felt your steel—when I saw your vile doubts in your blazing eyes as your hand drove death to my heart, as you thought—I first realized the meaning of the word hatred."

"For long months I hovered on the brink of the grave, John. I did not care so much to live during those first days. I felt that only the grave remained of value when they told me you had fled back to your own country. I wanted to die then. I begged them to let me die. But that, as I said, was during those first awful days. Then—

"I began to think that, after all, I had an object to live for. I began to see how bitterly you had wronged me. Not so much in stabbing me, John, for I could have forgiven that, recalling my situation; but in condemning me without a word of inquiry. In judging me vilest of the vile, without granting me leave to defend myself and my truth! When I thought of all this, John, I first knew the full meaning of that great change which had been wrought in my heart by your hideous looks, that day. I knew then that it was bitter hatred, intense longing for vengeance!"

"You know what I was when you first found me, John. You know, despite your foul sneers, that I was pure and innocent as an angel. You know, too, that the explanation which I have given you this night is naught more than the simple truth. You know now how my love died the death, for I have told you. You know that I was Juanita Sandoval. Now—I am the Wild Hog!"

Viciously came the last words, and those yellow, claw-like fingers shot out and fastened upon the throat of the Roundhead, closing and contracting tighter and tighter, until their tips were buried deep in the purpling skin—and with knees planted heavily upon his heaving chest, the Wild Hog laughed viciously as she glared down into his protruding eyeballs!

In vain he strove to shake off that crushing weight. Vainly he strove to wrench his throat from that terrible grip. Bound as he was, without the use of a limb, even his enormous strength was futilely called upon; it could not respond.

A sea of blood seemed sweeping down to overwhelm him in its loathsome depths. A frightful roaring filled his ears. His skull seemed about to burst with that awful pressure. Internal fire was consuming his vitals. Death was about to claim him as its prey.

But his end was not to come then, nor thus. Even in her madness, the Wild Hog did not lose her head, and when she saw that the Roundhead was helpless, she relaxed her grip, slipping from his chest, gag in hand, as she waited for the proper moment for reapplying it.

After a few convulsive gasps, she slipped the gag in place, and before the Roundhead could rally sufficiently to resist, or even utter a cry for possible aid, the stout thongs were securely tied behind his neck, and he was left utterly defenseless once more.

The Wild Hog picked up the cigar which had dropped from her lips as she made that vicious assault upon her destined victim, and sat by his side, quietly smoking away until, from his open eyes and regular breathing, she knew John Cromwell was capable of understanding what further words she had to utter.

"Yes, John, it was a lust for vengeance that nursed me back to life and strength once more. It was this thought that lifted me out of the grave. Me, do I say?" with a low, chilling laugh. "Rather the horrible ghost of my former self!"

"You have hardly forgotten how soft, how fair, how delicate I was in those days, John, even though so many years have come and gone. You have gazed into my face again this night. Now contrast the two visions, John! Does it surprise you? Is it so difficult for you to believe that the two are yet one? If so—stop to think a little!"

"Then I was happy. Then I loved and was beloved by you. Then I was pure and innocent and so tender-hearted that I could weep bitter tears over the accidental death of a bird, a butterfly—even the sight of a rudely-bruised flower pained my heart!"

"Now—I am the Wild Hog! You know what common report has to say about Javelina Juan, the River Raider? You know that crimes innumerable are laid at his door. You know that he delights in bloodshed and torture. You know this, through rumor, and it is true! The half has not been told of Javelina Juan, for he is a thousand times more black than painted even by his bitterest enemies—as I mean to prove to you before the end comes to us both, John Cromwell!"

"These are the contrasting portraits, John. There is not a single point of resemblance be-

tween the pair, yet each is drawn true to nature in even the slightest details. I was Juanita Sandoval, the woman-girl who loved you so wholly. I am Javelina Juan, the man who hates you and yours so venomously!"

"Why have I withheld my hand so long? Why have I permitted you to live in peace and security all these weary years? Why have I not dealt my blow for vengeance ere this? Why run so many chances of being cheated by death, either to you or myself?"

"Patience, John! The world was not made in a day, and there are yet no signs of dawn in the east. Time enough to make all things clear, for who will think of hunting you in this covert? Even if your cowboys should return before I have finished, who is to tell them that their missing chief is here?"

"Not the fellow who decoyed you hither, John! He is miles away from this spot, riding hard to overtake my gallant drove of peccaries! He loved gold enough to betray his master, but he loves life still better, and if you are ever to call him to account for the part he has played this night, you must search for him among my gallant tuskers!"

"And so—you see! I am in no hurry. It is a little taste of my long delayed vengeance, just to sit and watch you lying so helplessly at my feet—the same little feet you used to swear by, John! The same feet you have so often kissed, and placed upon your bowed neck in token of your abject slavery, John! Have you forgotten those silly days? Have you forgotten, John?"

Mockingly the Wild Hog laughed, bending forward and trying to span his throat with a hand, laughing anew as she felt his flesh creep and crawl beneath her claw-like fingers.

"It was smaller, then, John! You have grown bull-like in your old age! After all, mine is not the only change for the worse! If you had been so big, and clumsy, and coarse, a quarter of a century ago, John, it might have been better for both you and I!"

The Wild Hog drew back again, lighting a fresh cigar before adding:

"My reasons, John? Well, it was not wholly my fault. I did begin seeking for you, promptly enough; as soon as I could leave my bed, John. But you had never told me much about yourself, and all I asked was how deeply you loved me—poor fool! And so—there was nothing to guide my search. And so—I never found you until you came here."

"Time and again I prepared to make you a call, John, but as often something would arise to prevent. Until this night!"

"For weeks and months I have been preparing for this visit. My lust for revenge had grown too great to be quenched by your death, John. These long years taught me that there are many worse punishments than simple annihilation. I studied them all, over and over until—shall I tell you the conclusion I reached, John Cromwell?"

"I bribed your men. I picked my tools from the Shamrock, and carefully tutored them. I arranged everything to my liking, and then came down upon your home-nest, John. Not to kill, save your human watch-dogs. That would be a heavy blow, but it would end too soon to satisfy my hatred, John."

"Listen: I have captured your wife—the office I once filled, as you may remember, dear John!" with a short, harsh laugh. "I captured your daughter—just my age when you first saw me, I believe! Not so lovely, if I do say so, but as pure, as innocent, as guileless."

Fiercely the tortured man strove to burst his bonds, striving until his bodily powers were exhausted. And his enemy laughed jeeringly in his face the while.

"You are a fool for showing me how deeply you can feel, John, for now I know that I am on the right track. Now I know how to wring your heart of ice until it drips tears of blood. Now—but there is time enough between this and the crack of doom, John. And I must be far away from this spot before your neighbors begin to rally to your aid."

"I have only time left for briefly sketching my plans for the future, John, leaving all the details to open upon your vision as they ripen in due order."

"I do not mean to kill you, while I can hold your heart of hearts in my grip. I will leave you without other harm than you have already suffered, for I prefer you strong and able to bear up against such torture of mind before I strike your body."

"I have your wife and your daughter. I have sent them to a secure place of hiding—not to my own den, for that is far too well known, and I'll run no unnecessary risks; you may be just foolhardy enough to cross the river in hopes of winning back my treasures, John."

"Be sure I'll guard them jealously. Be sure I'll keep breath in their bodies as long as I can, for with their death my vengeance would be more than half lost."

"Your wife I will torture as exquisitely as you tortured me in the long ago, but less brutally. Be sure I'll never aim a dagger at her heart, let her lie in other arms as she may."

"Your daughter—what of her? A brave and gallant bridegroom, John. Handsomer far than

ever you was in your palmiest days. And—he calls me mother, John Cromwell!"

There was a terrible significance in those words which sent the helpless man into another vain struggle for freedom. As before, the Wild Hog watched him until exhaustion quickly ended the strife, then she cast her cigar aside, drawing a knife and bending over him:

"I have sworn all this, John Cromwell. And, lest you waken to fancy it naught but a nightmare dream, I subscribe my vow with the cross!"

With a swift, steady movement she slit the skin on his forehead in the shape of the symbol named, then turned away with a mocking laugh.

A moment later the sound of hoofstrokes came to his ears, then—a merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER XIX.

BY THE SKIN OF THEIR TEETH.

EVEN before Rattleplate Rob started to a sitting posture with that sharp cry of warning, Knight Latchford had noticed a peculiar tremor in the air, as of little sound-waves, rather than sound itself. Then, too, he began to feel the ground beneath him tremble and shiver, just as it sometimes does when a far off, thunder-roll heralds the coming of a severe storm. And with that thought he was glancing athwart the starry sky in search of clouds, when Randall offered another and far more terrible explanation.

The herds of Rump Ranch were stampeding, and heading directly for the grassy hollow in which they were lying, bound beyond the possibility of flight.

Already that faint, barely perceptible sound-wave was growing into a rumbling roar, split by higher notes; the clattering of horns together as the maddened cattle massed, the rattling volley of cloven hoofs in castanet fashion.

Only perceptible at first to the keenest ears, and those while touching the ground, that shivering, trembling, shuddering echo multiplied most marvelously, until it seemed to rock the solid earth itself.

"Do something—say something, man alive!" hoarsely cried the detective, driven nearly beside himself with fright, yet feeling a strange, almost ridiculous anger against his guide, who sat so still, who seemed so unconcerned as he stared in the direction from whence that avalanche of death was rolling upon them.

"Talking can't begin to do it justice!" cried Rattleplate, lifting his voice higher and higher as the once distant rumbling increased to the thundering of an enormous waterfall only a few rods away. "And do—I reckon we're done for, pardner!"

It was the recklessness of utter despair which rung out in that short, harsh voice, for Robert Randall had abandoned all hope of life. Even better than his mate, he realized what such a stampede meant. Far better than his companion, he could picture what would mark their graves when once the animal flood had passed over them.

"It won't last long, and there won't be enough of us left to care for looks, pardner!"

Dimly, indistinctly Knight Latchford caught those grim words, and then he turned upon his stomach, pressing his face to the ground, awaiting annihilation.

Not so the young ranger. Bolt upright he sat, his chin touching his left shoulder as he gazed in the direction from whence that living torrent was coming. His face was white, his eyes afire, his jaws firm set, but not through actual fear. Even in that awful moment he felt a dull wonder at this, for life was dear to him, and he had begun to hope that this world held a rare and precious prize for his winning!

Nearer, louder, more awe-inspiring with the passage of each moment. And still the guide stared over his shoulder through the rank grass, to catch his first glimpse of coming death.

Why was it delayed so long? Could his trained ears have deceived him? Were they deceiving him now?

For the thunderous roar seemed on every side, above, below, behind, yet no harm had come to them, not even a horn had caught his sight.

Then—

A wild, savage bellow—a momentary glimpse of tossing horns and steaming muzzles—a heavy shock, followed by a succession of lighter ones, ending in a whirling mass of stars a thousand-fold more brilliant than those in the blue vault above upon which he had so recently been gazing.

"Randall! where are you?"

His tones hoarse and choking from the cloud of dust with which the air was thickly laden, Knight Latchford lifted his head from where, ostrich-like, he had hugged the earth. Living, untouched, even, though he knew that one or more of the stampeding animals had crossed his body in their stride!

"Up in a balloon, boys!" came a doubting response from the still standing grass beyond the outer edge of the swath mowed down by those furiously plunging hoofs. "Anyway, I've got 'the little stars' here, and I'm looking for the moon!"

"Anyway, your tongue isn't lost!" with a

touch of spite retorted the detective, struggling to a sitting position once more, looking about in quest of his guide. "Is this your frightful stampede act?"

There was no immediate response, but he caught a rustling sound in the tall grass, and presently saw Rattleplate slowly, painfully rolling his way to rejoin him.

Already the sound of the stampede was dying out in the distance, and Latchford, seeing that no particular harm had come to his mate, began to feel angry. Was this another of Rattleplate's merry pranks? Had he been maliciously playing on his inexperience?

To him, as to Randall, that deafening roar had sounded from all sides alike. To him it seemed as though they must have been directly in the center of that madly sweeping herd. Yet—they were both living, neither injured, so far as appearances went.

"I was an ass for forgetting that they'd split and turn aside for us," he muttered, sourly, as Rattleplate paused within the edge of hoof-scored ground, both for rest and to lay a straight course before rolling further.

"Better be saying your prayers of thanksgiving, pardner!" quickly retorted the ranger. "You were never nearer your death than just now! A ten-foot wider swath, and a bloodhound couldn't scent out your death-bed!"

There was a touch of awe in the tones of the guide that, more than aught else, cleared the still misty wits of the detective. For the first time he really noticed how cleanly the division between bare earth, torn and hoof-scarred, and the tall grass was drawn. He turned his head to look in the opposite direction, and he saw that not a single blade marked the hollow as far as his eyes could reach by that light.

"Then—you mean—"

"That only the scattered fringe struck us. But that's plenty for me, thank you!" a muffled groan following the words. "If ever anybody is fool enough to ask me how it feels to butt a locomotive off the track, I'm going to tell 'em—yes I am, pardner!"

"You're not badly hurt, Randall?"

"Well, I don't want to stretch the truth, pardner," slowly rolling himself another turn nearer. "Look for yourself. All I'm dead sure of is that one three-year-old jumped clean through me, first clatter! But how many more chose the same awful gap, I hadn't time to count. Call it forty, and each one a little bigger than all the rest put together!"

Another revolution brought him close enough to the detective, and he lay on his back, breathing carefully, delicately, like one who is far from sure he has not received a fatal injury.

In truth, he had received an awkward blow on the shoulder, hurling him end over end into the untouched grass, thanks to his quartering position. Thus it came that he had not been trampled upon; for it would be too great a marvel had both men been crossed in the rush without bearing hoof-cuts to maim or kill outright.

Little by little Rattleplate Rob recovered from the shock, and finally rose to a sitting posture, the two men face to face. Both were grave enough, for each man knew that they had escaped an awful death by what still seemed a miracle.

"I could have taken oath we were full in their track," muttered Randall, casting an involuntary glance upward. "I wish I was loose enough to walk a bit. I'd like to follow the back-track a few rods, to see if the stampede didn't make a short turn. If it did—well, I'm not what you might call a religious critter, but if the hand of the Lord isn't to be seen in this—tell me why!"

Knight Latchford made no effort to do this. He, too, felt that their lives had been miraculously preserved, and somehow the thought chained his tongue for the time.

For a time that mutual silence was maintained, but though he was truly grateful for a renewed lease of life, Rattleplate Rob could not keep a still tongue forever. And after giving his bonds still another thorough test, he muttered in something like his old grim recklessness:

"Well, there's some consolation, after all, pardner! Tough as these lariats surely are, they will rot in time! Or the coyotes may happen this way and take a notion to try greasy leather for a change!"

"And us!"

Rattleplate lifted his head far enough to stare into the gloomy face of the detective for a moment, then dropped back again with a low, grim laugh as he uttered:

"I never thought of that! It takes you to spy out the bright side o' life, pardner!"

Latchford smothered an oath in his throat. When all looked so hopeless, it irritated him to see a man in equally evil case show such reckless indifference to what tortured him most acutely.

All about them was silence. The stars twinkled brightly, and the nearly round moon began to peep through the tall grass just beyond where they were lying so helpless.

The sounds of the stampeding cattle were no longer audible, nor had anything been seen of those who, almost beyond a doubt, had started

them in their mad flight. All had vanished, far away to the south.

Then, after a period of time which seemed to comprise far more weary hours than night ever before contained, Rattleplate Rob uttered a hoarse ejaculation, rising to a sitting posture with marvelous ease and celerity, his face turned toward a dimly visible glow in the sky.

"Act second, pardner!" he grated, his face white and hard-set.

"A fire!"

"And coming from right over the spot where we counted on putting in a fair night's sleep. I knew it—God pity the women-folk!"

"If we were only free!" muttered Latchford, savagely.

"We couldn't do any good *there*, pardner. Such as the Wild Hog has no need of red light by which to do up his bloody work. Long ago he's worked his will, and turned his snout toward his den—curse him!"

In strange contrast to the first words came that conclusion; they so even and cool, that so full of intense hatred and lust for vengeance.

"And—you remember Paul Joyce!" flashed the detective, eagerly. "You swore you recognized him! You say he wanted to win Cromwell's daughter for a wife! Now can you still refuse to join hands with me in hunting that merciless demon to the gallows?"

"If what I fear is true—if his hand can be traced in this foul deed—I'll hunt him to his death if he tries to put the width of this globe between us!" came the swift response.

"I'll hold you to that vow, Robert Randall."

Together they watched the red light glowing and spreading out in fan shape. They even fancied that they could catch the distant roaring of the flames, the crash of falling timbers.

Watched until neither could sit in idleness longer, and Rattleplate threw himself at length on the ground, bidding Latchford do the same.

"We'll try the knots again, pardner. Anything is better than eating our hearts out like this."

Back to back they lay, straining their fingers, loosening their nails in the vain endeavor to free themselves from those cruel ropes. They knew it was all in vain, even before they renewed their efforts, but they could not lie idle, they must try something to keep their hot brains from growing hotter.

At intervals they rested, only to begin again, doggedly keeping their gaze from that red beacon. And thus the time crawled slowly by until—was it fancy, or did they catch the faint echo of galloping hoof-strokes?

"Pray Heaven it's not another stampede!" muttered Latchford.

"Not that—I can make out—only one set, and they under a saddle!" panted Rattleplate Rob, suddenly lifting his body and glaring along the further swell in the prairie. "Ready to split your lungs when I give—Now, pardner!" he yelled, as he caught a glimpse of a human head and shoulders over the rise.

And their voices rose in a wild appeal for help!

CHAPTER XX.

TRUE HEARTS ON DECK.

THAT swell lay directly between them and the Rump Ranch, its position marked by the red glare of the blazing buildings.

Just beyond the point where the ground began to fall again, that solitary horseman was riding, only his head and shoulders visible above the blackness, but they looking like a moving cameo against the blood-red sky far away. So plainly outlined that the two eager callers could see that he wore a broad-brimmed hat—could almost take oath they could distinguish his profile!

In unison they lifted their voices, prolonging their call until it seemed as though their throats must split under the strain. And then, as the detective paused to catch his breath, Rattleplate flung all his powers into the wild, far-reaching yip-yip-yip! of cowboy and Indian alike.

Yet that steady rise and fall of the man at a gallop never broke for an instant. That face never turned toward them while its profile remained visible against the red sky. Straight on, as though born without ears, the horseman sped, to be swallowed up by the darkness beyond.

"May the foul fiend make his bed before day!" gasped Rattleplate Rob, as he saw that all was in vain.

He sunk back upon the ground, panting, catching his breath, shivering from crown to sole, quite as much through hot rage as temporary exhaustion.

Latchford did not yield so soon, clinging to hope long after he knew it was breath spent in vain. When he did give over, he lay like a log, seemingly abandoning all hope for the future.

Who that earless rider was they never knew for certain. It may have been Dan Titus, fleeing after the Wild Hogs to escape the vengeance of the master whom he had so cruelly betrayed into the hands of his bitterest enemy. It may have been one of the men sent for aid by the

Roundhead, though that is hardly possible. For almost surely his ears could not have avoided catching and answering to that wild appeal.

Most likely it was Javelina Juan, speeding away from the motte in which the Roundhead now lay, senseless, for the time being mercifully lost to all knowledge of his terrible grief.

Would that awful night never come to an end?

Time and again Rattleplate asked himself this question as he turned his face toward the east, hoping to catch the light of a new-born day. Time and again he averted his face, inwardly vowing that he would never again face that way until the day had fairly dawned.

It was a night which neither of those two men would forget, though they should live to count a full century. A night more crowded with mental torture than either of them would have believed a human brain could endure without giving way.

But all things have an end, and at length Latchford gave a hoarse cry that turned the sullen eyes of his guide once more toward the east. The sky was plainly lighter than when they last looked that way. The night was past, and the day was dawning.

"Not that it's much to howl about, pardner," grimly laughed Randall, lifting himself up once more. "I'm wondering how we'll feel when we turn our eyes the other way to watch the sun set again!"

Latchford shivered with something more penetrating than cold. It was a truly disagreeable remark, and he flashed an angry glance into the pale, strained face of his companion, snarling:

"If you can't make any better use of your tongue than—"

The sharp sentence was left unfinished. Both heads turned swiftly on their shoulders, once more looking toward the point of the compass where that red beacon had been in the sky. In the ears of each was echoing the notes of a human voice! Some strong-lunged man had sent forth a long, clear shout as though hailing one who was lost!

"Together, pard!" grated Rattleplate, swelling his lungs to lend full force to his voice as he gave reply.

Shrill, piercing, almost deafening their own ears, and prolonged until the hot blood surged upward into each brain, making it throb and thump almost unto bursting. Then—

An answering yell, followed almost instantly by the rapid pounding of a horse's hoofs in swift gallop!

Again and again they shouted, never ceasing until both caught sight of the rider crossing the swell in the early dawn, swinging his broad hat, echoing back their cries in hoarser tones, his own caught up and duplicated from half a dozen other points of the compass.

Even in his intense excitement Rattleplate Rob recognized the man, and pantingly muttered in warning to his companion:

"Not a word about Joyce! That's his foreman, and—"

It was indeed Austin McFarland, who jerked up his horse when so near the bound men that its hoofs fairly flung dirt over them; but as he bent over in his saddle to gaze, a cry of wonder, mingling with disappointment, parted his lips.

"Strangers—and I thought it was Cromwell!"

"Loosen us—then talk!" gasped Latchford, sinking on one side, completely exhausted.

McFarland leaped to the ground and with his keen knife quickly set them at liberty, thrusting a full flask of whisky into the trembling hand of the younger man, who held it to the parched lips of his employer before tasting a drop himself.

"We're played, pardner," he hoarsely uttered, with a grateful look into that bony face, then around at the others from Pea Jay Ranch as the cowboys rode up to the spot. "I'll thank you later!"

"You haven't seen aught of Cromwell! You don't know if—"

"We saw a rider, over yonder," with a nod toward the swell where the silent horseman had passed them by.

McFarland shook his head doubtfully as he muttered:

"I saw the trail, but it is none of his, I'm fearing, poor fellow! We found all gone, though he said he would wait at the ruins for our coming. Only that one trail, and it—have ye found aught, lads?"

As one man the cowboys shook their heads negatively.

"I know you now, partner," said Rattleplate, as he staggered to his feet with a wry grimace as the blood stung through his limbs. "You're the Pea Jay foreman, and—"

"Rattleplate Rob, as I'm a sinner!" ejaculated the Scot, gripping his hand ardently. "Ye're just the man we want right now! There's been the deevil's own work the night, and—"

"I know; the Wild Hog has raided the Rump," quickly interposed Randall, backing the foreman further away from Latchford, now surrounded by the sympathizing cowboys. "That hits your boss mighty hard, I'm thinking! Of course he's with you?"

McFarland shook his head, with sudden gravity, as he muttered:

"Not now, poor lad! It's too long a story for telling while so much remains to be done, but he's gone after the gang—gone, vowing to bring back the little lady or die trying!"

This was all Rattleplate Rob cared to hear just then. He had feared precipitate action on the part of his employer, should he come face to face with his quarry, and he knew that the Pea Jay cowboys would shoot him down like a mad dog in such a case.

By this time Latchford was able to stand on his feet, and when lifted into a saddle, he rode with something of his old-time grit. Rattleplate Rob also mounted, and the party turned their faces toward the ruins of Rump Ranch.

On the way McFarland gave a brief sketch of what had happened, but all that is new to the reader may be closely compressed.

He had met Paul Joyce, already starting on his self-imposed mission, and received orders to get fresh horses and return to again offer assistance to John Cromwell. He had obeyed, leaving two men to guard the Pea Jay Ranch, and reached the ruins, to find them wholly deserted. So far they had searched in vain for Cromwell, even raking over the still glowing embers, lest his crazed brain had led to suicide.

By this time the party had reached the ruins, and caught sight of a fair-sized squad of horsemen coming rapidly with led animals, from the north. And a hot flush came into the face of the young ranger as he distinguished one woman among the men. Even at that long range, he recognized Molly Fitzpatrick.

He hung back, rather than courted a meeting, and it was not until after he had taken a bath at the pump, and rearranged his garments as well as he could, after their hard usage, that Molly Fits saw him.

Was it a reflection of his blush that tinged her fair cheeks? Be that as it may, Miss Molly was braver than the young ranger, or else her heart was far less deeply engaged, for she frankly addressed him:

"I'm very glad to see you here, Mr. Randall," her big gray-blue eyes looking squarely into his as their hands met. "You're a man, for all they call you Rattleplate, and it's *men* that's needed most just now! Men to follow and save those poor women from worse than death!"

"I'll do my best, Miss Molly, if only for your—your friend's sake," the young ranger replied, with a clumsy break which brought a deeper flush to his cheek, and sent a brief flash of amusement through those honest eyes of the lady.

Brief as it was, Rattleplate Rob caught it, and as any young fellow over head and ears in love would, he felt that he must retrieve himself, let the risk be never so great.

"I meant—you know what I meant, Molly!" he said, in desperation, forgetting how many eyes might be upon them just then. "You know that I'd die for one love-look from your dear eyes, and now they are laughing at me!"

"It's not dying I'd have you, Mr. Randall, but living—alive and working like a man for the rescue of my dearest friend and her poor mother! Think of them, in that evil—"

"I'm thinking of you, Molly! Only say that I may hope—only say that you'll take me if I bring them back, and—"

"Never a word, unless it is *no!* Never a word until my little Faith is safe and sound within the circle of these two arms, Rob Randall!"

With this she was away, rejoining her father, where a grave discussion was going on. For during that brief interview one of the Rump cowboys had returned from his mission, bearing witness that the Roundhead had promised to await their return with air and fresh mounts at the ruins.

"He was some shook up, but I never see him when his brain was any stidder, gents," the witness concluded. "Long as they was the ghost of a chance fer to git his wimmen back, he wouldn't do harm to himself! He ain't built that way."

The cowboy was still speaking, when a panting dog came up and crouched fawningly at the feet of Molly Fits, whimpering as though it expected chastisement for breaking orders. And as she caught sight of it, a bright light gleamed in her eyes.

"John Cromwell never yet willingly broke his word to friend or enemy; ye all know that, neighbors! If he said he would stop here, he would not go away without some good cause. It may be—is there aught of his wearing to be found? If so, here's a nose that will follow his trail through fire and water at my bidding!"

"Molly, ye little devil, let me hug ye!" spluttered Jerry Fits, suiting the action to his words, while the dog, instinctively feeling that forgiveness was won, capered and yelped about them in frantic glee.

Nothing of the sort was to be found, but after several circles about the ruins, a trail was struck where the print was sufficiently clear for identification by the keen-eyed cowboy.

"I kin swear to the mark, with my two eyes shet tight!" he declared, and then Molly Fits led

her dog to the spot, talking to him as though he could understand her every word.

Promptly he took up the trail, running along it readily, closely followed by the entire party, with Molly in the lead. Straight for the little patch of trees and undergrowth he led the way, slipping into the thicket, only to set up a rapid yelping, as though he had treed his game.

"Me first, Miss Molly!" muttered the cowboy, pale as death as no human voice came from the thicket. "It may be too ugly fer *your* eyes!"

He plunged into the brush, a moment later uttering a wild cry:

"He's here! Dead—murdered!"

With one accord they rushed in to see for themselves.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ROUNDHEAD VOWS VENGEANCE.

LYING on the broad of his back, with face turned upward in the still gray light of the new day, they beheld the Roundhead of Rump Ranch.

By his figure, rather than his features, they recognized him. That powerful build was not common, and his garb was familiar to many who then stood as if awe-stricken, gazing down upon what nearly all felt was but a casket of clay.

For that upturned face seemed one mask of blood, lying thickest above the eyes, where the new light seemed to shape a cross, the arms of which rose a little higher than the red level, like swollen veins.

The cowboy who had been first to follow the dog, stood staring at this ugly vision with protruding eyeballs, seemingly struck by paralysis. The dog changed its yelping to a low, melancholy, wail-like howl.

Molly Fits took one look, then shrunk back, covering her eyes with a hand, shivering as if in a violent chill. And if she realized the fact that Rattleplate Rob encircled her form with an arm, drawing her fair head to his manly bosom with his free hand, she was too thoroughly overcome by that awful shock to resist or rebuke him as he deserved!

"It is too much—I want to be kicked for letting you go in there, darling!" the young ranger murmured, his hot lips touching—never so reverently!—her brow as he half-carried, half-led Molly Fits through the thicket to the open ground beyond.

It was to the level-headed Scotchman, Austin McFarland, that the credit belonged of discovering the truth; that John Cromwell was still alive, though unconscious of his surroundings.

The Pea Jay foreman pushed through the line before him, dropping on his knees beside the supposed corpse, one ear pressed lightly over its left breast. Only for an instant, then he cried out sharply:

"Watter—whusky, ye daft loons! he's nae mair deed than yeer wuts are leeven! Jump, ye deevils! Wad ye stay gowking theer like so many whin-stanes for the moss to grow on? Wad ye—"

A clip of his keen knife set those painfully distended jaws free from the gag inserted by Javelina Juan, and as many more relieved the cramped limbs, sufficient to permit the blood to resume its checked circulation, urged on as it was by the eager hands which responded to McFarland's angry appeal for aid.

For his keen senses had not betrayed him. John Cromwell was still alive, though he would hardly have emerged from that stupor without prompt and proper assistance.

The cowboy tore through the brush like a stampeding steer as he ran to bring water from the ranch, and not until then did Molly Fits succeed in freeing herself from the close embrace of Rattleplate Rob. Not until then did she seem conscious of the fact that there was an embrace at all!"

"Ye villain! at such a moment!" Molly panted, flashing her blue gray eyes into that irradiated face, then letting them droop as though they feared to read all that beamed in those jetty orbs. "And our poor friends in such sore trouble! And him—dead or dying, belike!"

"He's all right, Molly. Don't you hear them say so?" eagerly muttered Rattleplate, plainly indicating his ardent desire to resume his former part of consoler-in-chief. "Think of poor me! Think—"

"It's ashamed enough I am of ye already, without any more thinking—and there comes the man back! Will ye be aisy, Rob?"

Tantalus would have been a far more fitting name, the young guide felt, as Molly glided out of his reach, and it was a black, most uncharitable look which he cast upon the cowboy who, with hat full of cold water, was running smoothly back to the thicket. Only for his coming! Never before had he won so far—never before had he seen so fair a chance of winning the glorious prize on which he had set all his hopes.

That chance was gone now, for Molly was intercepting the cowboy with questions as voluble as they were sincere. And Molly led the way into the thicket, ashamed of the womanly fears which had driven her from the side of the man who so sorely needed careful attention.

"Don't I know how it'll be?" with an inward groan Rattleplate asked himself. "Don't I know that she'll be all ice for six months to come, to pay for this? Don't I know—if I only didn't!"

There was a ray of consciousness in the blood-shot eyes of the Roundhead as Molly Fits regained his side, and she caught a dim smile of recognition as her cool fingers gently moistened his cracked and bleeding lips with water from the cowboy's hat.

One fair round arm slipped under his head, lifting it upon her lap, and then, drop by drop at first, Molly gave him water and whisky, murmuring to the poor fellow as a fond mother might soothe her ailing babe. And Rattleplate watched her, all unconscious of what an attractive picture she was making of herself in her womanly charity. And deep down in his heart of hearts he registered a vow to win this woman for his wife, or die alone.

John Cromwell had suffered untold torments that night, and even those who knew him best were amazed at his rapid recovery of strength and voice. Almost before they dared hope he would pull through, the grim old Roundhead lifted his head from Molly's lap, struggling to his feet in spite of her anxious warnings.

"Ye're not fit, so soon, daddy! Ye'll break down all in a heap, so ye will, now? Think of little Faith and her mother!"

"Am I not thinking of them?"

Low, strained, yet much stronger than any other then present expected to hear from his lips, came these words, and there was a painful smile crossing that deep-lined face as John Cromwell flashed a look into the maiden's face. A smile that brought tears into her kindly eyes, for it was more sad than a flow of tears.

The Roundhead yielded so far as to mount Jerry Fits's horse as he left the thicket, riding as far as the ruins of Rump Ranch in silence.

Naturally enough all were eager to learn how he had come to such an evil pass, but they hardly dared to question him just then. He had suffered so much! His wrongs were so terrible! For the time being all this made him almost a sacred being in their eyes.

When the ruins were gained, John Cromwell checked his horse, and left the saddle, brushing a hand across his cross-marked forehead as he glanced over the company, now increased by a squad of men from yet another ranch to the east.

"Where is Dan Titus?" he harshly demanded, as he failed to see the gaunt cowboy among the others.

There was no response. He had not been seen by any of his fellows since they divided to spread the news of the Wild Hog's raid.

One by one John Cromwell faced his men, gazing keenly, searching into their faces. Some shrunk a little at that cold, yet burning look, but he could detect no treachery in their eyes.

"You wonder how I came yonder, bound and helpless, marked thus!" he said at length, touching the double slash above his eyes, painfully distinct through the stern frown which wrinkled his brows. "By the act of yet another traitor! By the cunning of another man whom I trusted in my blind grief. May his lying tongue swell in his jaws until it chokes him to death by inches! May his traitor hand wither and rot off at the shoulder!"

For a brief space his fierce rage checked his further speech. His face grew crimson. The blood started afresh from that cross above his flaming eyes. His throat swelled, despite his fierce grip upon it, and with a low cry of fear, Molly Fits sprung to his assistance, crying:

"Ye're killing yourself, daddy! Try to be patient—try to control yourself, daddy, for our dear ones' sake!"

The Roundhead caught her hands in his, dropping a kiss lightly on her troubled face, then pushed her away, his voice more natural as he said:

"You have cured me, Molly, and I'll not give way again."

Then, in terse, clear sentences, he told how foully he had been betrayed by Dan Titus into the hands of Javelina Juan. He told how the Wild Hog threatened his loved ones, but never revealed her reasons, nor her sex. And in the same cold, hard tones he added:

"If there is another traitor within reach of my voice; if there are others who have taken that merciless demon's gold as the price of their honor, let him or they keep out of my reach! As High Heaven records my oath! I'll never know rest or peace while one of the vile wretches cumber the earth! I'll hunt them down, though they try to put the breadth of this globe between us! And when found—so help me God!—I'll torture them even as they have tortured me and mine!"

"Amen to that, anyhow!" spluttered Jerry Fits, glaring ferociously about as though hoping to see a contradiction written on some face, the owner of which might be made to feel the weight of his tightly-clinched fists.

With his fierce vow still warm on his lips, the Roundhead strode over to the pump, falling on his knees and drinking long and freely before arising. When he stood erect, that awful pas-

sion had left his face pale and hard-set. That scorching fire had fled from his eyes, leaving them deep-sunken, marked with dark circles beneath, but clearer, cooler, more natural. And when he spoke again, his tones were cool and even as of old, before all this awful trouble came upon him in a night.

"You all have a fair idea of what has happened, friends, and there is no time to waste in giving the minor details. You know that the Wild Hog has carried off my wife and my daughter. You know what his reputation has been for years past. Knowing this, you can guess what sort of a chase I intend giving him and his evil gang."

"Why wouldn't ye, wid them two leddies at stake, sure!" cried Jerry Fits, his honest face all aglow with ardor.

"I want all the help I can get, but I'll hold no grudge against any man who has a reason for falling out of the chase."

"Nayther will I, but—I'll b'ate the ugly moog av him out flat as a harse-blanket, so I will, now!"

"And I'll be the first woman to cut him out a dress to help cover his lack of manhood!" cried Molly Fits, her fair face all aglow with indignation at the mere thought of such cowardice.

Then the air was split with a cheer, led by Rattleplate Rob, who had to "put on the curb" to keep from catching the darling girl to his bosom before all that company!

If there had been a single faint-heart in all that company—which there was not—that speech of Molly Fits would surely have converted it. After that, each man was eager to outdo his neighbors.

John Cromwell lifted a hand to restore silence, which followed promptly on his action being noted.

"There is one point on which I ask your advice before we make any decided move, neighbors," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly, though there was a visible tremor in his tones as he added:

"Of course I care naught for my property. Let that go. All I ask is to recover my women-folk from the hands of that pitiless demon, alive and unharmed if possible.

"When I lay helplessly at—at his mercy, he told me that he was far too cunning to even think of taking his captives across the river to his customary den. He said that would be too readily found by one urged on by such motives as mine.

"What I want to ask you is this: can we place any dependence on his words in this respect? Do you think he would have said so much, unless in hopes of throwing me on a wrong scent? I beg you think this out, calmly, clearly, for I cannot! My brain—sometimes it feels as though I must go mad!"

At last his forced composure failed him. His head drooped, and though he instinctively covered his face with his hands, he was betrayed by the hot tears as they trickled through his shivering fingers.

Molly Fits caught his arm, gently leading him away from the crowd, softly murmuring her sympathy as she motioned back the rest, her father among them.

"Don't try to choke them back, daddy, dear! Let them come, the more freely the better, for they will help clear your poor brain, so they will! And what is it to be ashamed of? Sure, daddy, I'm proud of them! They prove ye all the true, kind, manly man I've ever held ye up as being, for all the grave face ye put on to fool those who can't look below the surface! Cry your fill, daddy darling, for when we've got our dear ones safe back—as we will, please G d!—sure there'll be no room for aught but smiles and laughing!"

CHAPTER XXII.

RATTLEPLATE ROB ATTACHES HIS SEAL.

MOLLY was too deeply agitated herself to waste time in picking and choosing her words of comfort, but it may be doubted whether she could have done better had she kept never so cool and collected.

She was right in one thing—that overflow of tears was just what the sorely stricken man needed most at that juncture. Without it his tortured brain might have given way before the strain. With it, a part of that killing pressure was relieved.

Molly shielded him as much as possible from the consulting neighbors with her figure—full, voluptuous in its rounded outlines, yet one to waken noble rather than evil thoughts in a true man. And soothed by her gentle murmur, the master of Rump Ranch let his tears fall unrestrainedly.

Only when called upon by the rest for his opinion, did Rattleplate Rob say aught. Until then his eyes could see nothing but Molly Fits, whom he felt he had never loved half so dearly as now, while she was playing such a truly womanly part in soothing the sorrowing.

"What do I think?" the young man quickly responded. "Just this: if Javelina Juan had really meant to take his captives to another place than his usual den, would he have mentioned it? Wouldn't he have been only too eager for search to be led in a wrong direction? And as he said he'd not take them across the river,

the further bank of the Rio Grande is just where we've got to look for them—unless we can catch the devil and his imps this side."

"Will ye listhen to *that* now?" triumphantly cried Jerry Fits, who had been one of those who expressed much the same opinion. "Out av the lips av babes an' woise min!" nodding toward Rattleplate first, then smiting his huge chest until it sounded like a thickly-muffled drum.

"Then we'll call it settled, will we?" added Rattleplate, taking a step toward Molly and the Roundhead. "Time is precious, and the sooner we get down to sober work the better for the poor ladies. I'll tell Mr. Cromwell what we've agreed upon, while you look to the horses."

"An' it's me that'll go wid ye to tell Molly that same, me b'ye," chuckled Jerry Fits, slipping a hand through the arm of the ardent lover, whose face increased in length most amazingly, though he dared not decline the escort.

Was not Jerry Fits the father of Molly?

By this time the Roundhead was recovering himself under that gentle, womanly care, and though his cheeks still bore the traces of tears, it was more natural than it had appeared since he first realized how heavy a blow had been dealt him.

"I thank you, Molly, daughter," he muttered, clasping her to his broad breast and passionately kissing her lifted lips. "You have done me more good—you have more nearly cured my poor brain than anything else could do—save the presence of my dear ones, safe and unharmed by that pitiless demon!"

"And that is coming, daddy dear," with a look upon her fair face as of inspiration. "They will be saved—and I wish I was a man, that I might ride with you to their rescue!"

Rattleplate Rob involuntarily shook his head at this, then flushed crimson as he caught Jerry Fits scowling comically into his face.

"Ye're quite enough botheration as ye stand, Molly, ye devil," the fat rancher exploded, patting her soundly on the shoulder as he gripped the Roundhead with his other hand. "Av ye was a man—worryation to me wid the bossing I'd have to pit up wid, or take me l'ave av the ould Shamrock intirely!"

"The neighbors have decided? What is the verdict, Fitzpatrick?" quickly interposed the Roundhead, unconsciously favoring the lover as he drew the father away toward the other men, who were bustling about, shifting saddles to the backs of the animals which had been led to the spot for this purpose.

"That the devil tied to ye, av course," was the prompt response. "Wouldn't he lay a cruked thrail for ye av he could? Would he show ye the shortest road to git back the leddies? Devil save him for that!"

And Rattleplate Rob?

"Won't you give me one little word, Molly? And we taking a trail that may have no back-track for me? Not one little word, Molly?"

"Three, Mr. Randall, without cost or price," as the gray-blue eyes flashed a brief light into his eager face, then turned coyly away. "Do your duty!"

She adroitly slipped past him, and joined her father once more.

"You, is it?" ejaculated Jerry, scratching his bald pate with a puzzled air. "More botheration, av coarse! Why would ye come when it's only min that's wanted? Why didn't ye stop by home, an' thin we wouldn't be naadin' to waste a full hand by sindin' ye back to safety ag'in?"

"I owe her far too much to permit even a father to scold Molly," gravely, tenderly interposed the Roundhead. "If there is no other volunteer, I'd almost be willing to lose the necessary time myself."

"Where's the need?" promptly cried Molly, her fair face flushing as she saw how eagerly Rattleplate Rob was coming that way. "Am I a little child, to be afraid to ride that weenty way?"

"But there may be danger—"

"Of spooks?" swiftly retorted Molly, flashing a glance at Randall that checked him, almost like a blow. "Sure, I'm no believer in spirits, and for mortals—this knows how to ask them for the road!"

With a half-laugh she tapped the revolver at her trim waist, and yet there was naught unwomanly about her action. It was only natural, taking the time and place into consideration.

"Yet I'd feel more at ease if you would accept an escort, Molly," gravely responded the Roundhead. "Besides my women-folk, you are all I have left to love and care for. Unless your father will go back—"

"Woild harses couldn't drag the litttle finger av me!" spluttered Jerry Fits, indignantly. "Is it go back—me? Is it lose the chance av a shindy wid the loikes av them Wild Hags? It's crazy ye're growin', Crum'll, an' I'm sayin' it to the taath av ye—so I am, now!"

"Then pick one of your men to—"

"You need them more than I do, daddy!" cried Molly, turning to where her horse stood waiting, springing lightly into the saddle before even Rattleplate Rob could fairly divine her purpose, much less offer his aid. "And who

comes against my will must ride a good horse if he can keep close enough to play the escort ye talk about!"

She kissed her hand to her father and the Roundhead, adding:

"God be with ye, and if honest prayers can bring ye all back safely, with the precious ones in your midst, be sure they'll never be lacking! Go—and come back victorious!"

She touched her steed with the spur, dashing away at full gallop.

Did she see Rattleplate Rob hastening to where the horse which he had selected for his own use stood? If so, she never glanced back after once turning, even when the swift clatter of hoofs must have reached her ear. Yet—she was riding a fine, spirited animal, noted far and wide for its speed and bottom. Yet—she was rapidly being overhauled by a creature in every way its inferior!

Rattleplate Rob saw this, yet his face was pale and there was an anxious light in his dark eyes. Probably he was too deeply in love to read what lay just beneath the surface.

Not until the muzzle of his horse was at the haunch of Molly's mount, did that young lady seem aware of his coming. Then, with a start and a look of indignant amazement, she drew rein and faced her pursuer.

"Is it you, Mr. Randall? Is it my head or yours that is turned so completely? Sure, I thought yonder lay your proper course!"

"I couldn't go—"

"It's not your heart that's gone wrong, I'm hoping, Mr. Randall! Sure, I never looked on ye as a craven!" pitilessly pursuing her advantage, probably because she saw that she must fight desperately if she was to retain it to the end.

Flushed, trembling, unsteady voiced though he was, Rattleplate Rob looked as though he was determined to reach a final understanding then and there, if he could possibly bring it about.

"It is my heart, and I am a coward—before you Molly!" he said, desperately catching at the opening her words unconsciously afforded him. "So much a coward that—I can't tell you in the way I'd like—in the way I've so often planned and smoothed over while lying nights on the range! But—Molly, I'm dying for your love!"

"Is this a time to speak such words, Robert?" and despite her resolve there was involuntary encouragement in her trembling tones.

"Will I ever get a better chance?" he asked, pressing closer to her side, and trying to secure her whip-hand.

He failed in this, for her horse shied aside, snorting its dislike for the stranger whose muzzle touched its sensitive flank.

"Could you have picked out a worse?" was her retort, a bright light leaping into her eyes for an instant, to be dimmed by rising tears which she dashed aside with a swift gesture of her free hand, tightening the reins and keeping her animal head on. "With my dear Faith in deadly peril? With—even now she may be dead, dying!"

"In peril, but not of death. You know what the Roundhead said?"

"I know that he is riding to their rescue, while you are wasting precious time here with worse than nonsense!" flashed Molly.

"Is it nonsense to be loving you, Molly?" his face turning white and hard-set. "Sometimes I think it is madness. Sometimes I've felt that the best thing I could do was to blow my brains out. I would, only—I can't until I hear from your own sweet lips, Molly, that I stand no show at all. I can't do it until you tell me that you'll never return my love—never marry me in this world!"

"I'll tell you nothing this day, Robert Randall!" she declared, but unable to meet his burning gaze as at first, and with the soft flush deepening on her cheeks. "You should be yonder with the others. They are proving their manhood, while you—they'll be laughing at the two of us, so they will!"

"Give me something to laugh for—to thank Heaven for life, for knowing you, Molly!" urged Rattleplate, contriving to align the horses and secure her whip-hand in his warm clasp. "Give me something to take with me along the trail, Molly. Give me—only one little word. Is that so awful hard to speak, darling?"

"How do I know," she murmured, her eyes still downcast, her tones so soft that only the ears of a lover could have interpreted their syllables aright. "There are so many little words."

"Just say yes, Molly!" pressing his vantage ardently. "Just say that you do love me a little bit—a great lot, I mean. Just say that you will marry me when I come back. Won't you say that much, Molly?"

In his ardor Rattleplate sought to lift that hand to his lips, even while gazing longingly at those red, ripe lips, so temptingly near his own. But before it could meet his lips, Molly was free, laughing lightly.

"Is all that just one little word, Mr. Randall? Sure, it would tire the tongue o' me sorely to get around it all—for I haven't the rare gift of—is 'gab' a little word, sir?"

Rattleplate Rob saw that he was making a mistake in asking for too much so soon, and

though he flushed hotly, he sought to retrieve himself.

"It's not the word I hoped to hear you speak, Molly, but maybe it's the kindest you can find for a poor, worthless coot like me. And yet—I'll never give it up so, Molly. I'll stick to this trail until I've won 'yes' or got plain 'no' from your lips. I'll wait, if you will have it that way, but sooner or later you've got to face the music. Then why not let it be now?"

"It shall be, if you insist, Mr. Randall," was the response, with alarming coldness in voice and manner. "Shall I say no? I'll never say the other word to you—while Faith Cromwell is in need of help!"

"Will you promise to say yes if I bring her back to your arms?"

"I'll promise naught more than this, Robert," gravely. "Bring her back to my heart safe and sound, and I'll listen to all you can say."

"Molly, let me look into your eyes to see if I can read more than your lips utter," softly said Rattleplate, catching her hand and leaning over until—his lips touched hers in a genuine smack.

"That's the seal to our compact, Molly, my love, my future wife!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PERPLEXING TRAIL.

HAVING decided that Javelina Juan would almost surely take his captives with him across the Rio Grande, despite his assertion of the past night to the contrary, little time was cut to waste in leaving the ruined Rump Ranch for the trail.

Yet the stake was far too great for aught to be left to chance, and now that he felt himself actually on the track of vengeance, John Cromwell rapidly grew more like his old self.

He sent out the keenest trailers among the party, by this time quite a formidable force, to scout the outer edges of the broad spoor left by the stampeded stock, of which he knew there had been, for a time at least, three distinct bodies. This was owing to the location of his stock on the past night.

It should be the duty of these men to take note of any departure from the main trail, and decide whether, if these were of horses, they were simply straying from the main herd, or bearing riders.

Long before this, mention had been made of the single rider to whom Rattleplate and Latchford appealed in vain for aid, and on comparing accounts, Cromwell was of the opinion that they had seen the Wild Hog, soon after Javelina Juan left him cross-marked in the thicket.

The selected scouts were taken to the spot, where each one carefully inspected the hoof-prints, plainly written upon the ground which had been cut and loosened by the hoofs of the stampeding stock. Each one gauged and measured it until sure he could recognize it among a thousand others, then shot away to play the part assigned him.

This trail was followed by the main party, as it led direct along the broad spoor for miles before being lost by them.

Knight Latchford was among the main party, now and then interchanging words with Austin McFarland, for whom he had apparently taken a strong liking; but he never let drop the slightest hint as to his profession, or the stern purpose which brought him to that part of the country.

A quick glance from his cool, keen eyes reassured Rattleplate Rob on this point as that young man overtook the party, and when they could pass a word without having it overheard, Latchford said as much.

"Stick to that line, if you want to hunt in this pack, pardner," the young ranger earnestly muttered. "They're white, the lot of 'em; but it don't grow in the breed to savor detectives or sheriffs. If they thought you were either, they'd kick you out *too* quick! And almost weep because they were too tender-hearted to swing the pard of a pard!"

The first event of importance came along toward noon, when one of the scouts dashing up, briefly reported that a single trail had just joined the one along which they were pressing.

"I jest thought I'd tell ye, boss," with a short nod to McFarland, "for it's the track o' Yaller-boy!"

McFarland looked quickly toward John Cromwell, but he rode on without turning his head, though the canny Scot believed he both heard and understood. For "Yellowboy," as all the range well knew, was the favorite saddle-horse of Paul Joyce, master of Pea Jay Ranch.

In a whisper Rattleplate made Latchford as wise as the rest, adding:

"Try to puzzle it out, pard. Is it only a bluff, or is there two more faces like that picture you tote around with you?"

Shortly after the sun crossed the meridian, the trail, though broader and plainer than ever, since the three herds had been brought together by the thieves at points some little distance back, began to give cause for thought and worry and hard thinking.

From either side cattle had been permitted to stray out of line without being herded back to the main bunch, and almost constantly some of the party were discovering steers standing or

lying on the plain, which were at first supposed to be cripples, but on inspection proving to be sound and strong enough to travel many leagues further.

What did it mean?

There were no signs of pursuit other than that they were making, hours after these cattle had been permitted to fall out of the ranks. So far as they were concerned, there was no need of losing stock stolen at such a cost. Then why had they been abandoned?

So frequent became these scattered animals that the Roundhead almost harshly bade the men pay no further attention to them, as they were thus losing valuable time from the main trail.

"And right there ye've hit it, man!" excitedly cried McFarland, the words chosen by the Roundhead giving him a glimpse of light. "It's thinking to delay ye—it's tossing sops to Cerberus!"

Some of the party were for accepting this solution, for lack of a better, but John Cromwell made no sign. The trail of the horse which he believed had borne the Wild Hog, had long since been lost sight of amid a litter of other tracks, and he knew that his only hope now was in having made the correct decision at the outset. If the lost ones had not been taken to Mexico—

He dared not face that awful alternative!

The men had come prepared for hasty riding, bringing food and drink in their pockets or saddle-bags, so there was no halting when the noon hour came. They ate as they rode along, not having traveled fast enough to greatly distress their animals, so rest was not thought of on their account.

As the afternoon declined, the abandoned stock became still more plenty, no longer in singles or pairs or trios, but in little bunches, far too valuable to be left uncared for so far from their owner's range. So many of the pursuing party thought, and so Jerry Fits, by virtue of the closer intimacy which existed between them, ventured to tell the grim Roundhead.

"It's a sin an' a shame to lose the time, Crum'll," he said, laying one fat hand on the thigh of the stern, dark-faced sufferer, a coaxing, wheedling sound in his voice as though he was trying to win over an obstinate child to its own good. "But it'd be a mighty sight bigger wan to lave them stock all at the loose, d'ye moind, now?"

"What are they to me?" almost savagely grated the Roundhead, his sunken eyes glowing as though back of them his brain was ablaze. "What do I care for them—how can I think of such trifles while the life and honor of my wife and child are hanging in the balance?"

He drove spurs into the flanks of his horse, dashing on ahead as though he must make swifter progress or go mad!

Jerry Fits shook his head with a mighty sigh to match his girth, but dared say no more, just then. The Roundhead soon after reined his steed to a more moderate gait, seeing that he had far out-paced his flanking scouts.

This precaution was still adhered to, though nearly all of the company had about decided that it was only a delay which might better have been avoided. If Javelina Juan had brought his captives any part of the distance along the main trail, it was hardly probable that he would veer aside at this stage, losing so much valuable time.

Not even Jerry Fits liked to suggest as much to the Roundhead. Always cold and hard to approach, since that trail opened he was harder and grimmer than ever, as though he feared to show a kindly look to his friends and neighbors, lest he break down completely.

But the situation soon became such that action must be taken. All of this ground had been gone over by the thieves and their plunder at one wild, headlong stampede, as the trail plainly indicated. As though they had anticipated immediate pursuit by the force far too powerful for them to think of fighting, the robbers had goaded the cattle onward at killing speed, keeping the main bunch compact, but making no attempt to recover those that broke away from the edges. When this suicidal course had broken down any number, they were abandoned at once, and the mad rush kept up until, just as the sun was about to set, the pursuers came upon what remained of the horned portion of the plunder, many lying stiff in death where they had dropped in their tracks, others too far gone for recovery, but the large majority only requiring rest to be as valuable as ever.

When he saw this, even John Cromwell drew rein and silently dismounted from his tired horse.

"We'll have to rest the beasts, friends, to say nothing of yourselves. As for food," with a short, hard laugh as he glanced over the hundreds of cattle, "that is plenty enough, and all we lack is fire by which to cook it."

"There is yet light enough for trailing, Mr. Cromwell," said Rattleplate Rob, riding up to his side. "Though they've left the split-hoofs, they've hung on to the round-feet. I'll take a scout further, and mayhap I can make out something worth the trouble."

The young ranger was good as his word, and it was after dusk when he returned, a simple shake of his head being the extent of his report.

He had made no discovery of importance. There was the trail still leading toward the Rio Grande, composed now entirely of horses and mules, numerous enough to afford each raider a fresh mount at short intervals, and putting it altogether out of the question to hope for catching them up before they reached Mexican soil, unless something extraordinary should happen to delay their flight.

Material for a fire was collected, and supper hastily cooked. For the most part this was prepared and eaten in silence, but each brain was busy as its owner's jaws, trying to unriddle this perplexing trail.

John Cromwell was the first to broach the puzzling subject, and he did this as soon as his friends had eaten their fill and lighted their pipes for a smoke.

"I know what is troubling you, friends," he said, his tones cold, but only through the severe strain which he had to put upon his own feelings. "At first I thought it only a cunning trick on the part of—on their part, tempting me to drop off men to gather up my property lest it be forever lost. As if—"

He paused short, smothering the hot scorn which rung out in his tone at that pitiful thought, then resumed as before:

"But I was wrong, as you can see by what lies all around us. If there were any signs of other pursuit, or if we had not been so hopelessly in their rear, it would not be so hard to account for all. But such rascals are not such fools as to get scared at naught. They knew I would be delayed too long to catch up with them much if any before they could reach the river with the stock."

"Knowing all this, and having taken the trouble and risk of running off the cattle, why have they abandoned it so soon? This is the point on which I would like your judgment, gentlemen."

One after another gave his opinion, and for the most part they were identical; everything went to prove that there was more than an ordinary lust for plunder. The stock had been driven off, partly to cover their real ends, partly to inflict as much loss as possible on the Roundhead, and, it might be, with an eye to picking up portions of the scattered herds after he had pressed by in pursuit.

A few held that, owing to the probable absence of Javelina Juan with his captives, the raiders had lost their heads, alarmed by the burning of Rump Ranch. This told them the whole country would be startled into prompt action, and fearing to be cut off from the river by those who would have less far to ride than the company then present, they had abandoned the slower stock, only keeping the horses and mules, since by shifting from one to another they could hasten rather than retard their flight by holding on to that portion of their plunder.

Rattleplate Rob took no part in this discussion, for such it was in a fair way to become, each man growing more positive that he had taken the correct view of the matter, until the Roundhead himself asked him:

"Have you naught to offer, Mr. Randall? May we hear from you?"

"I know that the cattle have been abandoned, and there'll be time enough in the future for asking just why this should be," the young ranger bluntly responded. "I'm thinking heap more about the ladies than anything of less importance."

"We've come far enough to see that it is useless to hope for overtaking the Wild Hog this side of the river. Then, why not pick two good men to ride at once to each practicable ford along the river, to find out at which place, if any, the Wild Hog crossed? I'll volunteer for one man, and I'm sure my pardner here will keep me company."

"I'm wholly at your service, Randall," promptly responded Knight Latchford, stepping to Rattleplate's side.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"I'LL WIN A WIFE, OR LOSE A LIFE!" No one else spoke for a few seconds. Each man felt half-ashamed that this sensible proposition had not come from his own lips, instead of wasting breath on what could wait longer without further harm.

"An' that's jist what I'd hev spoke me own self, av it wasn't that I lift me common sinse be hoind me in me other shuit av clothes, d'ye moind, gentlemin?" spluttered fat Jerry Fits. "The b'ye's roight, an' it's Jerry Fits that's backin' him up in it, too!"

John Cromwell seemed strongly impressed with the idea, though he waited to see if any other proposal was made. McFarland ventured:

"I think it is the best we can do. Two men for each ford will be enough to find out all that can be learned without putting the enemy too plainly on their guard. One would serve, unless an accident happened so he couldn't ride to the rendezvous to report. With two men, that will be guarded against as well as possible."

"Then, a few men might be left to bunch the stock and turn them head-homeward. The rest could follow the trail to its crossing, and there await the report of those sent to the different fords."

"McFarland expresses my idea, far better than I could do it myself," smiled Rattlecate Rob. "I didn't go into details, for fear I'd forget what I wanted to get in hardest!"

There was some further discussion, mainly about the various details, such as the number and location of the fords which it would be advisable to visit. In this Rattlecate Rob took little part, simply naming the crossing which he would scout with Latchford. This was his unquestioned privilege, of course, since his was the scheme.

"You've got something lying under all this, Randall," muttered Latchford, as he imitated the movements of his guide, preparing his horse for a night's ride.

"Nothing you'll kick against, if you're still in the same notion you were when trussed up in that blessed draw, pardner," guardedly responded the young ranger. "Hold your whisk until we're safe beyond earshot, and I'll open up my little budget."

Meanwhile the Roundhead was accepting volunteers for the crossings, giving preference to those who could, if necessary, both question and answer Mexicans, and next in accordance with their age and freedom from close family ties.

"Because there will be more or less risk in the duty, friends," he soberly explained. "Risk to all, but particularly to the ones who are led by a happy fate to the place where the Wild Hog made for the further side. Almost certainly there will be cunning and evil eyes on the watch, ready to report to Javelina Juan, unless they see a chance to use powder or cold steel."

In case the right trail was struck by any of the parties about to be dispatched, a smoke signal was to be sent up at once, and maintained for at least an hour. In such a case, all others would hasten without delay to that point. If no such discovery was made, after careful search and inquiry if possible, the scouts were to make their way up or down the river, according to location, until they found the main force, which would be where the stolen horses and mules were taken over the debated line. There the Roundhead would be waiting for them, when their future course could be decided upon.

Rattlecate Rob quietly waited until all this was outlined, then mounted his horse and, with Knight Latchford bearing him company, he waved the Roundhead an adieu, riding briskly away through the gloom.

"I'm ready to listen whenever you're ready to unload, Robert," the detective said, dryly, after fully a mile had been traversed in silence.

Rattlecate Rob laughed lightly, the darkness hiding the smile of good-humored malice on his fine face, for right well he knew how hotly his companion had chafed before he would or could bring himself to break that silence first.

"I thought you'd figured it all out to suit yourself, pardner," he said, promptly enough.

"I've given over trying to comprehend anything! You call this Texas, I believe? I call it Topsy-turvyland! Everything travels crab-fashion, and only the unexpected happens!"

"Well, we're not always like this, pardner. I won't lie to you even a little bit. I'd rather the reputation of Texas should suffer for fun and frolic, rather than soil my lips with a stretch-em-long. And so—you have had a pretty rough deal since yesterday!"

"I'm not growling about that. I'm only wanting to know if what's ahead is worth keeping open eyes another night? There were a good many minutes in last night, Robert! more than I ever thought of counting before!"

"You want to clap hands on a living Paul Joyce, don't you, pard?"

"Living or dead, with life for choice!"

"That's what I reckoned," with a short, hard laugh as he added: "You've seen something of the old Roundhead. You can judge what sort of show we'll have for hauling Joyce out of the muss with breath in his lungs if Cromwell gets his lick in first. Mighty little, pard!"

"Then you think that there is no mistake? You think there's no 'double' business about it?" eagerly asked Latchford.

"I know that the original of the picture you tote in your pocket was with Javelina Juan last night. I know that he was one of those who raided the Rump, and carried off the two ladies. I know that he was the very moral of Paul Joyce, not only in the mug he toted under that bunch of false hair, but in shape, in size, in walk, in voice. Even before I suspected that beard was false, I wondered how he could have a voice so mighty like that of Joyce!"

"What sort of a game can he be playing, then?"

"Simple enough—black enough! He's tried his level best to win the old man's daughter for a wife. Faith liked him well enough, but the Roundhead wouldn't have it that way. He all but kicked Pea Jay out of his ranch, I've heard say!"

"I begin to smell the rodent, Robert!"

"I thought you would, pard," with a low laugh. "It's an old game, but one that's mighty

hard to beat when played right up to the notch! His weakest card was playing himself instead of laying back to pull the wires, but I reckon he didn't dare trust the Wild Hog too mighty much! Maybe he thought he'd have harder work winning Faith from Juan than from Roundhead. And so—well, he shows up as the true lover, and gets into a huff that lets him slip away from the rest of the hunt. He follows Javelina home, and pretty soon—unless he trips on a snag by the way—back he'll sail with flying colors, the little lady in tow, to claim her hand as the fitting reward for his gallantry—may the Old Boy use him for a fire-poker!"

"And you?" persisted Latchford, with a half-laugh.

Rattlecate Rob hesitated for a little, but then gravely replied:

"I'll win a wife, or I'll lose a life, pardner! You're no fool. I know you saw enough back yonder to see how I'm fixed. You know that I'm dead over head and ears in love with the—with Miss Fitzpatrick," managing to substitute the formal title for the flood of adjectives which rose in his throat as he recalled that daring rape of a kiss.

"Well, I rather reckoned there was something of the sort going on between you," dryly. "And Miss Fitzpatrick has promised to marry you if you bring her the head of this Pea Jay?"

"She never named him, nor did I. Never you mind just what was or was not promised. It's enough that I've determined to bring back Faith Cromwell, safe and unharmed, if mortal man can bring it about!"

Knight Latchford said nothing, for he was shrewd enough to know that his jesting manner was chafing his guide. And as Rattlecate Rob touched up his steed with the spur a bit, some little distance was covered before the silence was broken.

But Rattlecate was not one to hold hard feelings long, and by the time another mile was covered, he spoke out:

"I know something about this Wild Hog and his haunts, for I helped give him and his drove more than one hot chase in ranger days. I helped string up a couple of his worst spies, and one of them tried to buy off by telling all he knew about the raider and his places of hiding."

"These dens were all on the wrong side of the river, and you know how strict orders are against anything that can be twisted into invasion. We couldn't always slip through the lines, in force, but I've had more than one run on forbidden ground. And what I learned then I've not forgotten."

"Then you think you know where Javelina Juan headed for?"

"Thinking isn't knowing, pardner, but I'm risking my hopes of a wife on it!" earnestly replied Rattlecate. "Of course we've got to make sure, before putting our foot fairly into it; but that hadn't ought to be hard for two cool heads like yours and mine!"

Knight Latchford relapsed into silence, carefully smoothing out the little kinks in the evidence as he rode along. More than ever he began to think Rattlecate was right. More than ever he felt that if they could follow this difficult trail to the end, it would lead him to his long-sought vengeance. And so he said:

"I'm with you, Robert! I'll follow wherever you care to lead!"

And the two trailers clasped hands as they rode through the night.

CHAPTER XXV.

PITILESS AS FATE.

On the Mexican side of the Rio Grande was pitched a night-camp, of as vile and dangerous a set of thieves, footpads, raiders and cut-throats as ever cursed the debatable line between freedom and barbarism: the band which owned Javelina Juan as chief.

The night was clear and pleasant, and there was little need of shelter for man or beast. Fires were blazing brightly, and a few whose appetites were not so readily satisfied, still squatted around these, wagging their jaws.

It hardly required a second glance to determine pretty accurately the character of these men. The weapons they bore, the words they uttered, the unusual number of horses hard by, kept from straying by armed guards, spoke only too clearly.

A little removed from the fires, under a bushy-topped tree, two women were sitting close together, the head of one resting on the bosom of the other.

"Try not to think of it, Faith," the latter was murmuring, her own sufferings lost sight of for the moment in her longing to comfort if even in so slight a degree her almost broken-hearted child. "Try to forget what you saw and heard. Try to think only of the time when we shall be free once more—free and happy with John!"

"I cannot, mother!" and the slender figure of the Roundhead's daughter shivered violently. "When I try, it only comes back stronger than ever! It was his voice, and yet—Mother, if you love me, say that I am wrong—say that it was not Paul!"

Mrs. Cromwell could not say that, and though she gently caressed that fair head, pressing it

tenderly, lovingly to her bosom, folding her arms about the poor child, Faith moaned in her agony of mind, for she knew what that silence meant: another besides herself had detected the tones of Paul Joyce in the chief of their assailants that black night!

And yet—why had he maintained his disguise so long? Why had he not boldly avowed his purpose when he must know his identity was more than suspected?

Mrs. Cromwell briefly recalled the events following that victory of the Wild Hog at Rump Ranch. How the man who called himself Pablo Sandoval, but whom she and Faith both had recognized by voice, by shape, by manner, as Paul Joyce, assumed charge of them both shortly after the stock was stampeded, while Javelina Juan vanished from sight for hours.

She recalled how carefully this black-bearded had guarded them both from harm or insult during the time he was in charge, and how courteous he was in addressing Faith. How different everything became when Javelina Juan overtook them and assumed charge, while Pablo Sandoval from that time vanished from their sight up to this hour.

She recalled all this, yet she could not wholly believe that Paul Joyce and Pablo Sandoval were one and the same. Nor could she fairly declare that they were not identical.

Poor Faith had sobbed herself into partial rest, when Javelina Juan approached their resting place, smoking a cigar, the red glow of the nearest fire showing that yellow, lined countenance in an evil smile of mingled triumph and hatred.

Mrs. Cromwell shivered at the Wild Hog's coming, for since discovering the real sex of the marauder her fear had increased instead of growing less. Although Javelina had not as yet exposed her real cause for hatred, the raider had given ample proof of its existence.

"Still tears, tears, naught but tears, little fool?" she harshly laughed as she stood before her helpless victims, those black eyes filled with a glow of unholy exultation. "Still bemoaning the absence of my gallant son? Still wondering why he lingers, and eating your heart out with grief at his lack of appreciation, little idiot?"

"She is weeping for her ruined home—for her missing father, you merciless bag!" bitterly cried Mrs. Cromwell. "As for your evil son—all we mourn for is that he did not take his witch of a mother with him!"

Never before had that pale, slender, worn woman dared flash out like this, and for a moment Javelina Juan—to give the name as claimed by the raider, in spite of sex—stared in amaze. But then she bent forward and sharply struck those pale lips with her hand, laughing like a veritable fiend as she drew back to retort:

"Is it so? Is there life and spirit in you, after all? So much the better! It will make more sport when I come to wring your heart dry! It will help you to prolong my reward, by bearing up longer against the thousand deaths I've sworn by all the saints shall fall upon your head, wife of a dog!"

"Whose teeth will soon be at your throat, unless your fears set your feet to flight at the first sound of his coming!"

Javelina Juan laughed lightly, smothering her fierce anger as by magic. After all, this was as she preferred it should be. There would be more sport in breaking a fiery spirit than in torturing one too meek and gentle to offer any resistance.

"It is partly so, my precious," she said, dropping to an easy position close beside the two captives, lazily puffing at her cigar. "It is true that the Roundhead is coming fast along our track. I have just learned as much from one of my gallant spies. He is coming, this bull-dog in whose teeth you have so much confidence; coming—to what?"

"To set us free and punish you as your foul deeds deserve!"

"Are you really idiot enough to believe that, my precious guest?" in mock amazement. "Are we to sit with closed eyes and folded hands, meekly awaiting the punishment you may decide upon? Do you really believe that John Cromwell will have it all his own way? That he will ever draw breath on this side of the big river?"

"You say he is coming along your trail," steadily retorted Mrs. Cromwell. "If so—and I can well believe it, knowing him as I do—all Mexico hasn't men enough to check him before he gains the side of his wife and daughter!"

"Then we'll try what women can do to stop him in his mad career, my enthusiastic one," laughed the Wild Hog, adding in sharper, sterner tones: "And those women shall be yourself and child!"

Instinctively Mrs. Cromwell pressed Faith closer to her bosom, feeling a strange pang of terror as she met that fiery look. The Wild Hog saw this, and laughed mockingly.

"He is not all brute, this Roundhead. He has a heart, where his dear ones are concerned. He will listen to them, when an enemy would be scorned until too late. And so—through you, my dear, and her, the precious lily, will I warn this fierce war-dog to keep on his own side of the river. Through your lips will I warn him that

worse than death awaits his crossing the Rio Grande!"

"If I refuse?" faltered Mrs. Cromwell.

"I will show you the trunkless head of your loved husband within an hour of the first step he takes on Mexican soil," was the cold response, and Javelina Juan dropped that jeering, mocking tone for one of stern, deadly earnestness. "He will be led into an ambush and shot down without having time to strike a blow in self-defense, much less do aught to set you two at liberty, as you fondly imagine.

"Have you not missed my gallant son, Pablo? Now you know what he has been busied with. He has gathered an army of good men and true. He has spies watching your husband, and his army in readiness to crush the Texans if I lift my hand to give the sign. Shall I say to him, *strike!* or will you two bid the Roundhead stop?"

As she spoke thus, Javelina Juan produced pen and paper, dropping them on the lap of the woman, whose momentarily flushed face was now pale as death.

"Write what I dictate, or know that you are sealing the doom of your husband and that of all who are coming with him. Refuse, and he dies. More—I will tear your child from your arms, and never again shall you two meet in this life. As for the other world—well, you and I have little to hope from there, I reckon."

Still Mrs. Cromwell hesitated. This very request showed her that John Cromwell must be coming in force, else the Wild Hog would not insist so strongly on her aid in checking his progress.

The chief uttered a sharp cry, and two fierce-looking rascals hurried to the spot, silently saluting, ready to carry out her orders. She motioned them to wait, then added, sternly, pitilessly:

"Make your choice, woman. Write as I dictate, or these honest fellows shall take away your child to—never mind her fate. You will care little for that, since you refuse to save her by a few scratches of a pen."

"Tell me what I am to write, and then I'll answer you."

Javelina Juan hesitated for a brief space, but there was a desperation in that pale, lined face that warned her not to press her advantage too far just then. And so she made reply:

"Write that you and your child are, up to the present, alive and unharmed. Say that your treatment depends wholly upon his future actions; that no harm shall come to either of you so long as he keeps to his own side of the river. Say that his crossing will be the signal for your death; that it will hurry your child to a far worse fate. Say this much to him, and say to yourself that all I have promised shall most certainly be executed in case you refuse to write!"

Mrs. Cromwell buried her face in her hands, trying to decide what she should do. Javelina Juan made a signal, and the two men rudely caught poor Faith, dragging her a little distance from her mother, holding her helpless while Javelina Juan covered the nearly distract ed mother with a cocked pistol, sharply bidding her write at once.

The poor woman obeyed, for though Faith bravely repressed her fears, she showed how great these were by her ghastly white face.

Javelina Juan quickly read the lines written and as though satisfied with their purport, signed her men to release the girl. As Faith fell into the arms of her mother, both sobbing, both half-crazed, the Wild Hog picked up the pen and ink-bottle, adding a few hasty lines to the note, using her stiff sombrero as a desk.

Without another word to her helpless captives, she turned away and was followed by a slender, crafty looking rascal who rose from his seat at one of the fires.

"You are ready, my man?"

"Jest as soon as I kin saddle up, boss," was the prompt response.

"I think I can trust you, Dobler?"

"Ef not, why not? You saved my hide when the rumpus was kicked up over my carving Pedro. I hain't fergot that, boss!"

"I'll still stand between you and Pedro's friends, if you perform this duty well, for I know not another in all the band who could do it half so surely, if you feel in the humor."

"I'll do it, boss, or croak in tryin' to git that!" earnestly.

"Listen, then; the Roundhead is coming along our trail. He will soon reach the river, but he must never cross it until I am willing. Go you to his gang, and play serpent until you see a fit chance for dropping this bit of paper where it will be sure to meet his eyes. That is the main point. The next in importance is that you are not seen. Can you do this much, Tom Dobler?"

"Ef any other man livin' kin, I reckon, boss," with a confident grin upon his weasel-like countenance.

"Then be off with you! I'll break your hand down with gold when you come back with a favorable report!" cried Javelina Juan, her black eyes turning red with anticipated victory.

Before either could say or do more, there

came a wild alarm which roused the entire camp and created the most intense excitement.

A single horseman came thundering through the fire-lit space, on a big "buckskin" horse, his revolvers cracking rapidly, scattering the raiders from about the fires with yells of angry dismay!

"Faith—Mrs. Cromwell?" the bold rider shouted as he caught sight of the two captives, who sprung to their feet at the first alarm. "I'll save you both or perish by your side!"

"Paul—my love!" shrieked Faith, springing to meet him, her arms outstretched, forgetting the recent horrible doubts. "Save us for—"

He wrenched up his steed and bent over to grasp her form, but the pause was fatal to her hopes. The Wild Hogs rallied, closed in, tearing the rash rider from his saddle with savage oaths and vicious yells!

CHAPTER XXVI.

PYRAMUS AND THISBE.

"STILL moping? Still mourning for that which fate has written shall never come to pass? Why be so foolish, little one? Why deliberately draw ugly lines upon thy fair face? Why reddening those charming eyes by tears which should belong to age alone! Such as yours, my dear," and Juanita Sandoval turned with a mocking courtesy toward Mrs. Cromwell.

The two women, mother and daughter, still captives, were seated in a large chamber, dimly lighted through narrow slits in the thick wall. The floor was bare, of hardly-beaten earth. The furniture consisted of a small table, two backless stools, a low couch-like bed, covered with the spotted skins of the jaguar or Mexican tiger.

The Wild Hog had abruptly appeared before them, no longer in the garments which marked Javelina Juan, but in clothes more appropriate to her real sex. Her dress was of rustling silk, rich and bright-hued, being almost blood-red in color. Over her head was passed a lace mantilla, fastened by a golden dagger. In her ears, on her throat, her arms and fingers, flashed and sparkled jeweled ornaments.

But all this could not disguise the fact that Juanita Sandoval, whatever she might have been in her earlier and more innocent days, was an object of repulsion rather than admiration or love.

Those deep lines might have been caused by suffering, as she had hinted to John Cromwell, but they were too deep to be hidden by the paint and powder which she so freely used as Juanita. The life led as Juan, was hardly calculated to keep Juanita youthful and attractive.

And yet there was something of triumphant scorn in her jetty orbs as they roved over the soiled and ragged attire of the Roundhead's wife, then with a downward glance at her own gay raiment. Juanita was not too old to be vain, it appeared!

"I am too blunt, dear friend?" she purred, softly tapping the face of the woman whom she had visited expressly for tormenting. "You blush with indignation at my indiscretion? And yet, is it not true? Are we not growing old, you and I? *Ay de mi!*" with an exaggerated sigh, as she sunk upon the couch, where she rested her pointed chin upon her joined hands, with elbows resting on her knees.

"Time was—time has been! But time will be no more for such as you and I, my dear! We have had our innings. We have had our triumphs. We have brought many a brave and gallant youth to our feet, to sigh out his heart as we laughed his vows of undying love to scorn!"

Faith silently drew closer to her mother, pale and trembling. This strange being ever inspired her with a sickening fear, but never had she been so repulsive as now, with her gay attire, her flashing jewels, her mocking tones and diabolical eyes.

"You and I, my dear!" Juanita resumed, paying no attention to the young woman, keeping her serpent-like eyes fixed upon that wife whose place she had claimed belonged to her by rights. "But I was first!" in shriller, fiercer tones, though her position was not altered. "I was first, I tell you! I skimmed the rich cream off the dish which was afterward offered to you! Do you hear, woman? I was first! I will be last, perhaps—who knows?"

"Still no reply, though Mrs. Cromwell bent her face lower over the fair head of her trembling daughter. This was not the first time Juanita had tried to torture her with these assertions. More than once since that awful scene at the night-camp near the southern bank of the Rio Grande, Juanita Sandoval had brought up the dead past, though never making her meaning perfectly clear.

"Ah-ha! do you begin to see, at last?" exultantly cried Juanita, her eyes glittering still more vividly than before. "Is it a flush of shame which you are seeking to hide upon the head of your child? Are you thinking of her, and what people will call her when they know that John Cromwell was married long before he met her mother—and that his lawful wife is still living?"

"And I am that wife!" flashed the other, boldly facing the malicious hag, hot indignation flaming in her eyes. "I am the only wife John

Cromwell ever had. For myself, I'd scorn to reply to you, but if you dare to repeat such a vile insinuation before my child—"

"I was wrong, no doubt," interposed Juanita, with assumed meekness, which was flatly belied by that malignant smile in her eyes. "The past is dead; why seek to revive it? Why rake up ashes which can only bring tears to the poor child's eyes? Do I not love her—I? Is she not growing dearer and more precious in my sight with each day that passes? Does not each day bring the time nearer when she is to become my daughter as well as yours?"

"Better death than such a hideous fate!" cried Faith, springing to her feet and confronting their captor, no longer a weak and trembling child, but an outraged woman.

"Good!" laughed Juanita, lifting her face to rub her jeweled hands together as if delighted. "I like to see a modest maiden, who shrinks from the lightest mention of her lover—her soon-to-be bridegroom! It is a good sign, and the angels will never be so hard-hearted as to record a little lie like that."

"Faith—daughter—pay no heed to the malicious old hag!"

Juanita Sandoval sprung to her feet, plucking the gold-hafted dagger from her hair as though about to avenge that epithet with death. She crouched for the leap, her yellow face so hideous with rage that Faith gave a cry of fear as she shrunk into the arms of her mother.

Juanita checked her mad impulse, replacing the dagger, after feeling of its point. Her voice returned to its former mockery as she slowly uttered:

"Am I a fool as well as an old hag? Shall I cut short my triumph by a single stroke? Can the past be so briefly atoned for? Not so, my tongue of vinegar! You shall live and suffer—suffer at least a tithe of what I have undergone in my time!"

"And then—it is unlucky to shadow a bridal by a funeral. My noble Pablo would never forgive his mother for dressing his dainty little bride in mourning!"

"Treat me as your malice dictates, but in mercy spare this helpless child!" murmured Mrs. Cromwell, her fictitious powers failing her.

"Kill me—let me die, and go to poor Paul!" hysterically moaned Faith, shivering as though in a heavy chill.

"Is that what troubles you so sorely?" laughed Juanita, crossing the room and rapping sharply on the wall where it appeared to be a solid blank, but where a narrow opening appeared as if by magic. "Are you grieving over your lover? Would you like to look upon his face once more, before you blot out the memory by a fairer, nobler, braver one—that of my Pablo, your Pablo, as he is so soon to become?"

She sprung to the side of the twain, tearing them apart and half-dragging, half carrying Faith back to that narrow slit in the wall, menacing the mother with her dagger's point the while.

"Paul—Paul Joyce!" she cried sharply through the aperture.

"Who calls on me?" came a faint, yet distinct response.

Faith shivered like a leaf, a strange light leaping into her eyes as they turned upward. For she recognized that voice, and with her distracted brain, fancied it came from beyond the grave.

"Lower, my angel!" sneered Juanita, reading her thoughts aright. "Much nearer you than heaven, my precious! So near, and yet so far!"

She laughed mockingly, her glowing eyes betraying what devilish joy this exercise of her power was giving her.

"Did you think I caused his death when he played the madman so rarely, back yonder by the river? Not so, my little one! Juanita Sandoval fancied she could put him to a far better use than that! Why not? Is he not young, and handsome, and fit for loving and to be loved? Am I so old—am I such a hideous hag as your delightful mother called me but a bit ago?"

Laughing afresh, Juanita forced the maiden's eyes close to the slit in the wall, drawing back a little to menace Mrs. Cromwell anew.

And Faith—her heart gave one mighty leap, then seemed to stand still, so great was the surprise which greeted her eyes.

Lying upon a bare bench, his hands and feet heavily ironed, was the man whom she believed dead—the daring lover who had risked all to tear her from the grip of the Wild Hog! Lying there, a ray of light falling athwart his pale, haggard face, looking so like a corpse that a heart-breaking wail broke from her lips.

"Paul, my darling! dead—murdered—all for my sake!"

"Faith—surely I am not dreaming?" hoarsely cried the chained man, causing his irons to rattle and clink as he strove to arise: only to fail, for he was bound to the bench, only his upper person free to be moved.

"Paul—alive!" gasped Faith, pressing her face as far into the narrow slit as she could.

"Faith!" hoarsely gasped the prisoner, turning his eyes so they rested on her white face.

Only that one brief glance! Then Juanita

dragged the maiden back from the aperture, lifting her free hand, when the opening was closed as swiftly and as silently as it had been opened.

"For the last time as bachelor and maiden!" mockingly cried the Mexican woman. "When next you meet, you will have a husband, he a wife!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

RATTLEPATE ROB AS A DECOY.

"I'm a liar from 'way back if it isn't! Spot him, pard!"

The voice was that of Rattlepate Rob o' the Range, and it was his hand that gripped Knight Latchford so sharply by the arm, pointing toward a slouching figure only a few yards in advance.

"Where shall I start the shaft, Robert?"

"Your eyes, man! Now—if he'd only turn his lovely mug this way for an instant! If—photograph him, pard!"

The slouching figure stepped within a fan of light coming out of an open door, and when his foot was almost on the threshold, he unconsciously granted the prayer which fell from the lips of the young ranger. He turned his head, casting a careless glance up and down the street, though there was nothing in his actions to prove that he knew or suspected that he was being shadowed.

"I've got him plain enough to swear by, Robert," coolly muttered the detective as the fellow vanished within the building. "What must I do with the negative, master?"

Rattlepate Rob did not reply at once, but stepped over to where the shadows lay still denser, a touch of the hand warning Latchford to follow in silence.

Without questioning he was obeyed. The positions of the two men seemed to have been flatly reversed from what was the case when we first met them. Rattlepate Rob was leader as well as guide, and he it was who chose this path or avoided the other one.

There has been no open arrangement made to this effect, but ever since leaving Texas to set foot upon the forbidden soil, Latchford had looked up to Rattlepate Rob for instructions.

He knew that their venture was a perilous one, look at it from whatever point they might. He knew that they were taking their lives in their hands when they crossed the Rio Grande, none the less surely that they were disguised in a measure by wearing the national costume, which Randall procured as an aid to carrying out his schemes.

"You caught that sweet mug, pardner?" whispered Rattlepate Rob, as he paused in the gloom, but from whence a free view of that open door could be obtained.

"It was a snap-shot, Robert, but I caught him fairly well," was the prompt response, in the same guarded tones.

"You'd know him again, of course?"

"I'd agree to pick him out of a thousand, and that's no light boast, Robert," with a low laugh. "These greasy, ragged, smoke-dyed rascals are so much alike that it takes an artist to tell t'other from which! But I always could brag on my organ of identity, if there is such a one on the chart of phrenology."

Rattlepate Rob allowed Latchford to run on without interruption, crouching, leaning forward, his dark eyes gleaming vividly as he scanned the two figures which just then blurred that fan of light. Had their game taken alarm? Was he already taking to flight, with a companion by way of guard?

"Now, either one of those beauties, yonder, look enough like your 'mash' to be himself, Robert," softly added Latchford, noting the eager doubt of his comrade, and answering it before a question could be asked. "But I'm ready to bear witness that neither is. Of kin, possibly, but not the original Jacobs!"

"If I could see their faces fairly, I'd—you're right, pardner!" with a long breath of relief as the pair stepped outside the door, the light for an instant falling fairly across their faces.

"Of course I'm right," equably murmured the detective as the two Mexicans were lost to sight among the shadows beyond. "Your particular sweetness was taller than either of those knaves. He has a longer pair of mustaches. There was a slit in his poncho large enough to let his right shoulder slip through it if he didn't give it a twist askew. And he wore big gold hoops in his ears, while they have probably put theirs in soak—if Mexicans are blessed with 'my uncles'!"

Rattlepate Rob stared keenly into the face of his companion at this, more than half suspecting him of jesting, but Latchford seemed in sober earnest, despite his light manner.

"It's my specialty, Randall," he quietly added, reading that gaze aright. "I never forget a face, and if I have reason to suspect a man, all I ask for future identification is a single fair glance. To prove it, Robert—you remember the dirty rascal who drew our bonds so curiously tight, that night of the stampede?"

"That was the man, himself!" ejaculated the young ranger. "I knew I'd seen him before, and the fancy hit me that he *might* be one of

the gang we want to learn something definite about."

"I'll insure you against an action for false imprisonment if you run the rascal in, Robert," softly laughed the detective.

"With your help I'll make the rifle, pardner," nodded Rattlepate.

"I'm at your service, of course, but—isn't it rather cheeky in two men thinking to run a town of this size?"

"I'd risk even that, if nothing else would serve, pard," nodded the younger man, his eyes glowing. "You know how much I've got at stake!"

"And I know, too, that you've got to claim your winnings before you can wear them, Robert. And—I'd hate mightily to tote back a cold, thoroughly ventilated bridegroom! And these children of the sun know so well how to use hot lead and cold steel!"

Despite his strong though suppressed excitement, Rattlepate Rob could not help laughing at the grimly resigned manner of the detective.

"I'll snake that beauty out of his den without a yelp or blow, pardner," he quickly replied. "I'll go in yonder, as good a Greaser as any in the *posada*. I'll drop a hint that no one but a member of the Wild Hog's gang can pick up. And when I come out again, I'll risk my hopes of winning—you know what!—that he'll be be close at my heels, to dog me home to learn why I haven't got any on this side of the river! For it's dollars to cents that he's left here by Javelina Juan to carry word to the den in case danger threatens!"

"But if there are more than one of the spies, Robert? Suppose a whole regiment should follow on your scent?"

"That's a risk we've got to run, and one we must meet as best we can, pard. We can't go it blind any longer. That fellow can sing the song we want to hear most, and here goes to decoy him within reach of your hands. I reckon you'll be able to do the rest?"

"Bring him past the dark corner, and I'll give him the grip in my best style, Robert," grimly laughed the detective.

Without further speech they glided silently across to the drinking-house, Latchford crouching down at the corner, where the gloom afforded him almost perfect concealment, while Rattlepate Rob, drawing the folds of his *poncho* up about his face, lightly crossed the threshold.

Swiftly, keenly he glanced around the room, which contained fully a score figures, for the greater part ragged, disreputable-looking Mexicans of the lower class. Just in the act of drinking he saw his man, but not another familiar face could he detect among the many.

Rattlepate stepped up to the rude bar, dropping a coin before him, asking for a glass of *aguardiente*. As he did so his elbow touched the fellow whom he hoped to decoy into the grip of the detective, and with all the exaggerated politeness belonging to his class, or the class which he was then representing, Rattlepate Rob bowed and asked pardon for his abominable awkwardness.

"Will we drown the memory in a social glass, senor? Do not refuse, unless you would see me die of mortification at so rudely disturbing a gallant *caballero*."

Rattlepate Rob purposely gave his last words a foreign touch, barely perceptible in accent to a suspicious ear, at the same time permitting his *poncho* to drop away and afford a fair view of his face. He saw a change—slight, but positive enough for one so keenly observant—flit across that dark, not unhandsome face, then bade the man in attendance fill a second glass.

He knew that if not fully recognized, he had awakened the suspicions of his intended victim, and was careful not to alarm him too soon. For this reason he turned his eyes across the bar to give his order, thus granting the Mexican time enough to school his startled nerves and hide his suspicions.

He knew that he was running a risk in this, for it was about an even chance that the spy would send a knife through his ribs as the easiest, surest method of disposing of a dangerous enemy; but he was playing for high stakes, and took the chances—to *win*!

"To our future acquaintance, senor," he bowed, clinking glasses, then tossing off the fiery liquor and turning toward the door.

He felt, rather than heard the spy follow after him, for he dared not risk a backward glance lest it frighten the rascal into calling others to his assistance instead of trying to stalk his game alone.

He stepped across the threshold and turned to the left, leisurely passing the corner where Latchford was crouching, giving a low hiss.

Ten seconds later he whirled and bounded back, for he caught the sound of a heavy blow, and knew that Latchford was at work!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN UNWILLING WITNESS.

"I've got him, Robert!" quietly called out the detective, as Rattlepate Rob came back with a panther-like bound. "You see if his mates are startled by the cracking of his skull, will you?"

"Don't let him yelp—"

"I've sealed his lips, Robert. You cover my rear, and I'll tote the precious song-bird back to our horses."

Latchford lifted the limp body in his arms with a degree of strength wonderful in a man of his size, flinging it across his shoulder and walking rapidly away through the shadows.

Rattlepate Rob looked toward the door of the saloon, but no one appeared to have heard the slight scuffle, and after a few moments he silently followed in the track of the detective, overtaking him on the outskirts of the straggling village, where they had concealed their horses in a little clump of bushes.

"He isn't a croaker, pard?" a little anxiously muttered the young ranger, as he bent over the motionless Mexican, whom Latchford dumped from his shoulder without ceremony. "You didn't hit him *too* heavy?"

"If he's turned angel, Robert, blame his mother for not giving him a thicker skull," was the equable response. "I just tapped him a little one. It wouldn't have fazed one of our crooks, but I had my fingers on his wind as well, and I hit just to make him forget where his cold steel was deposited. So—all right?"

"He's alive, safe enough!" exultantly uttered Rattlepate, rising from his examination.

"Then we'll pull out?" asked Latchford, as he twisted the ragged *poncho* tightly about the head and shoulders of their captive.

"To the ford, yes. Hand him up to me, and I'll carry him like a lamb!" laughed Rattlepate, mounting his horse and leaning over to help the detective in hoisting the limp figure across his thighs. "Now, jump critter and follow, pard! I want to get where I can blow off steam, or I'll spoil my b'il'er—dead sure!"

The village was located barely half a mile from the ford alluded to, and at a brisk trot the two adventurers covered the distance, without meeting anything on the way to give them uneasiness.

"They're anything but suspicious, Robert," observed Latchford, as they gained the sloping shore by means of which the river was entered from the Mexican side. "I thought they were more jealous of invasion?"

"It's our luck, and I'm not growling at it, pardner," laughed Rattlepate Rob, in high glee over their unexpectedly speedy success. "All the same, you want to keep all eyes open and go on in advance. If you run against anything in the shape of a snag, let me know in time to make a break for better quarters, will you?"

"It's Texas, not the alternative of sulphurous renown, Robert," laughed the cool detective, as he rode into the water, making for the further side, keeping several rods in advance of his comrade.

This was the most dangerous portion of their trip, and Rattlepate Rob almost held his breath as he rode, more than half-anticipating a hail or a shout from one bank or the other. There was little to choose between the two, he knew well enough.

While crossing the river they were fully exposed to the bright beams of the almost full moon, and that doubly-laden horse might well awaken suspicions if any eyes should happen to be turned upon the ford.

"Good as old wheat!" laughed Latchford, greeting his mate as he gained the Texas shore without anything happening to alarm them. "Now what comes next? Don't be bashful, but command while you wear the official insignia, Robert. I'm open for anything short of kissing your last mash: I must positively draw the line at that, Robert."

There was no immediate response, Randall glancing keenly around them, his gaze lingering longest on the narrow strip of shore which was washed by the waters, running at the base of the rising bank below them until hidden from further search by the shadows.

"We'll go down yonder, pardner," he decided, turning the head of his animal down-stream, followed by the detective.

For several hundred feet they rode along, now out of the moonlight, with a rising bank close to their left hand, and the river on their right, silently rolling along toward the Gulf. The strip of beach, as it might be called, ran into a small peninsula, forming an eddy at its lower side, where quite a quantity of driftwood had collected.

"I thought I remembered something like this," laughed Rattlepate Rob, as he slipped out of his saddle to the rear, deftly balancing the muffled captive over the pommel as he slid to the ground. "You hitch the critters by the bank, and then come help me oil the clapper of this sweet duck, pardner."

Rattlepate drew the Mexican from the saddle-horn, dropping him on the dry sand with a thump that drew a faint groan from his muffled lips: a most welcome sound to the ears of the young ranger!

He quickly removed the ragged *poncho*, barring the fellow's face, into which he dashed a handful of cool water, causing him to gasp and pant as though choking.

"It's kill or cure with you, Robert," laughed Latchford, coming up from having secured the

horses. "And unless his face belies his disposition, the lump of dirt would choose the dying part! Ten to one that's the nearest he ever came to washing his face since birth."

"All the same, he's sweeter than a posy in my sight, pardner," declared the young ranger, with a vivid glow leaping into his eyes.

"But I'm not in love, you must remember," laughed Latchford.

The Mexican gave a start and would have lifted his head, only for the broad hand which was instantly clapped upon it. And leaning over him, with stern menace in eyes and tone, Rattleplate muttered:

"Quiet, senor! Try to cry out, and your soul goes floating down to purgatory by way of the river!"

The captive shivered with fear as his eyes met those blazing orbs, and it was plain enough that he fully recognized the speaker.

"Ask him if he can just as well sing his little song in the English tongue, Robert," interposed Latchford. "I'm too rusty in Spanish to get the full savor, and that would save you the trouble of interpreting for my benefit. I know you hate to talk."

"You comprehend, senor? You understand that if you try to cry out for the help which will never reach you in time, death will be your portion. Now—I will free your tongue, my friend! Think twice before you begin using it!"

Rattleplate drew back a little, but holding the Mexican's own knife bared in his hand, its point suggestively tickling the frightened rascal's bosom the while. And in faint, husky tones he begged for mercy.

"That will depend on how promptly and truthfully you answer the questions which I am about to propound, senor," interposed the ranger, still with his tones almost scrupulously polite. "If your memory should prove treacherous, or your tongue refuse to shape the proper response, I fear your heart will have to suffer. This is a very long and sharp-pointed bit of steel, senor! Even with my weak fingers on the handle, I would risk betting a modest sum that I could make its point grate on the gravel beneath you, without taking the trouble of rolling your precious body out of its path!"

"Mercy—spare me, senor!" gasped the frightened wretch.

"When you tell me what you thought when you heard my voice and met my eyes back in the *posada*, senor. When you explain why you followed me out into the night. Come—I am waiting!"

"I thought I knew you. I thought you were an old friend, and maybe you would give me a *peso* or two to keep me from starving, senor!"

"To pay for drawing those infernal lassoes so tight, no doubt!" the detective broke in, a touch of anger in his tones. "I reckon you might as well kill the rascal at once, Robert! He can't tell the truth if he should try! Just stick him a foot or two for me, please!"

"Time enough. The night is still young," nodded Rattleplate, then turning again to the Mexican, speaking sharply, sternly: "You are lying to me, dog! You knew me for a Texan. You suspected I was there to work harm or injury to your chief, Javelina Juan. Where is he now? When did you report to him last?"

"By all the saints, senor, I—"

"By all the devils, senor, I swear to you that I am not to be deceived or thrown off the trail. I swear to you that I'll start a fire and toast you by inches, beginning with your feet and working up until I drive the truth out at your lips! I'll do all this, and a thousand times more, unless you make full and free confession! Do you comprehend, senor?"

"To save time, I'll scratch up a pile of driftwood to begin with, Robert," said Latchford, turning away toward the heap of dry wood at the lower edge of the peninsula, seemingly as sure it would be needed.

That was a bit of realism which proved more effective even than the fierce threats of the younger captor, and the Mexican gasped:

"I will tell—I will confess all, senor! Only spare me such—"

Rattleplate Rob cut him short sharply. There was no time to waste in idle speech, and he at once began his questioning.

Only its general tenor need be given in this connection, for what the Mexican admitted only went to prove that the young ranger had reasoned correctly when he spoke of the old retreat which Javelina Juan made use of in years gone by.

The captive admitted that Javelina Juan, with a small escort, had crossed the river at this ford, then hastened up-river to meet the main body left in charge of the stolen stock, taking the captives along.

That he had been left to watch this ford, together with a comrade, one of whom was to hasten to warn the Wild Hog in case enemies should follow the real trail thus far, while the other was to keep an eye on their movements.

He admitted that the Wild Hog was occupying the half-ruined hacienda named by Rattleplate, and that she had only a portion of her force with her, the other having been used to lay a false trail from the ford where the animals were driven into Mexico.

Rob pressed his questions sharply, and only ceased when fully satisfied that the frightened wretch was telling all he knew. Then he bound the fellow's arms, drawing aside with Latchford to settle the best method of disposing of the prisoner.

Neither felt like killing the rascal, in cold blood, but both knew that it would be suicidal to turn him free, or to attempt to take him along under guard. Not only their own lives, but the possible rescue of the Wild Hog's captives depended on his continued silence for days.

"I suppose he would starve to death if left tied to one of these logs?" muttered Latchford, glancing at the driftwood.

Rattleplate uttered a cry of triumph as though these words had shown him a way out of the difficulty, and without pausing to explain further, just then, he had Latchford assist in rolling out two goodly sized logs of dry wood from the pile, anchoring them in the eddy by leaving one end of each on the bar.

Using a lariat taken from his saddle-bow, Randall formed a couple of short loops which he attached to the logs, then dragged the Mexican to the spot, stopping his mouth with a firm gag.

"We'll send him adrift down the river, pard!" he laughed, in partial explanation at this stage. "He'll be picked up before he reaches the Gulf, but not in time to do us any harm, even if he blows his tale all over the country!"

This was more merciful than actual killing, and Latchford worked to better advantage after receiving the information. Though he felt that all was fair while fighting such ruthless enemies, he receded from actually taking a man's life.

The Mexican, shivering with terror, praying for mercy with his protruding eyes, was lifted up and his legs slipped through the loops attached to the logs. Another hitch held his body in an upright position when his raft was floated, and their ends were bound in a manner to prevent them from rolling over or breaking apart. And when the raft was dragged around to the edge of the current, it performed to admiration. Unless the ropes were gnawed or cut away, the captive was in no danger of getting drowned or his liberty, either!

"Good luck, senor!" laughed Rattleplate as he pushed off the float and the current swept it down-stream. "If anybody asks who designed that craft, tell him Rattleplate Rob war the arkiteek."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

MEANWHILE, how was it prospering with the grim old Roundhead and his force?

After the scouts had all departed to make their inspection of the various fords of the Rio Grande, a small number of men were drawn up by lot to gather up the stray stock and "bunch" them, preparatory to moving with the entire lot back to the Rump Ranch.

As this was accomplished by lot, none of the company had cause for hard feelings, though Jerry Fits, who was among the number pointed out by fate, "kicked like a bay steer!" as one of the cowboys elegantly termed it.

To be cheated out of the anticipated "shindy" with the Wild Hogs! To be turned into a cow-puncher in his old age, when there were plenty of lighter, younger, better riders and poorer fighters than he!

"Divil fly away wid the loock that's got no betther sinse nor that!" he snorted, in high indignation. "But it's not Jurry Fits that'll dem'ane himsif be kickin' ag'in' even sich cruked luck! Jurry Fits 'll do his juty whoile thay're's so manny as wan lone loose huff lift sthrayin' on the tap o' the futshool, av ye don't kick up too moighty loud a rumpus wid de Woild Hags! Av ye do—to the divil wid every huff an' harn for me. I'll bev me litttle soop av foon wid the Gr'asers foorst, thin' t'rash the l'ave o' ye in shape foor scholdin'—divil re-saave me av I won't, now! That's Jurry Fits, begob!"

After this violent explosion on the part of the fat master of Shamrock Ranch, there was no further trouble about the preliminary arrangements. Ferry Fits marshaled his cowboys with the first crack of dawn, falling to work like an experienced herder, while the Roundhead with the remainder of his forces followed along the trail left by the cattle-thieves.

There was no difficulty experienced in keeping to this. Though only the more valuable and swifter of the plunder had been retained by the Wild Hogs, this comprised quite a number of head, and their hoofs wrote both plain and deep instructions on the ground.

Shortly after leaving the point where the horned cattle had been abandoned, the trail they were following made an abrupt bend to the west, and those among the party who were best acquainted with the Rio Grande, at once named the ford for which, almost beyond a doubt, the Wild Hogs had made in order to reach Mexican soil.

The grim old Roundhead clinched his teeth tightly as he listened, for he knew from report

how difficult and even dangerous was this crossing. What if—but he strove to banish that thought. Javelina Juan would not willfully endanger the lives of her valuable captives. Her hatred for him was far too great for that. They must live, to suffer torments. For through their sufferings his would be greater.

In due course of time the crossing was gained, and though they all had known the uselessness of hoping to overtake the enemy before his foot pressed his own soil, one and all felt heart sink and grow faint when the truth could no longer be ignored.

Only the silent river. Only the banks, with the sloping approach to the ford on either side.

It was too late in the evening for more than a hasty examination of the Texan shore, in faint hopes of recognizing the track of Javelina Juan or some sign of the captives having really crossed at this point. The further shore must be left for another day, since they had agreed not to press the chase further until the scouts above and below had time to investigate and return with their reports.

It was hard for all of them, burning as they did with fierce longings for revenge on the River Raiders, but a thousand-fold harder for John Cromwell. To lie idle, while every hour was adding to the distance between his loved ones and himself! While every hour lent venomous Juanita Sandoval more latitude for her revenge!

Nine men out of every ten would have broken down before that awful strain, but the Roundhead showed it only in his restless movements, in his wakefulness, his sunken eyes which flamed with an unquenchable fire.

With the first gleam of day, he was in the saddle and crossing the ford to search the further shore. He found where a crude shelter had been rigged up, possibly for the captives. He found a bit of cloth which he knew came from the dress of his wife. Only that; but it was enough to send him along the trail for several miles before he could find strength of will enough to turn himself back to the ford.

He had promised to await the return of his scouts. His present force was a perilously weak one to invade Mexico.

All that day was spent in waiting; the hardest of all work, when there is so much at stake!

With the shades of night came Jerry Fits, his fat countenance filled with grim determination and sheepish drollery, fighting to see which should come out victor.

"Divil a worrud will Jurry Fits be afther hearkin' to gentlemin!" he spluttered, forestalling their questions. "Sure, whin the job was all jobbed, an' the stock all bunched, an' everything movin' as if in a pond o' graase, an' wan o' me min waitin' roight intil the middle av ye-wid his harrut full to overrunnin' wid prayers will Jurry Fits come an' take his place whoile he goes back to take Jurry Fits's place wid the stock—ye know ye air, Tim Doolan!" winking violently as he shook his huge fist in the face of a staring, bewildered cowboy from the Shamrock. "Ye know ye whispered av Jurry Fits 'uld pay ye an ixtry month's wages, ye'd joomp at the chance av changin' places wid Jurry Fits! Tell Jurry Fits he's paintin' the gob o' him black wid a loie, ye divil, an'—say yis, Timothy, dear, an' I'll make it two months!"

A faint smile flitted across the hard-set face of the Roundhead, and he firmly gripped the hand of his enthusiastic neighbor.

"I'm only too glad to have you with me, Fitzpatrick. It was only to satisfy the rest that I dropped even a single man to look after the stock. You shall stay, and so shall Doolan."

"Will ye luk at that, ye obstinate craythure, now?" scowled Jerry Fits into the face of the still confused cowboy. "See what ye lose be not leppin' at a chance, will ye? Two good months' harrud wages! Well, that's an offer Jurry Fits'll kape in his own pocket after this!"

Supper was hardly over that evening when the cowboys on guard-duty passed word that a force of mounted men were coming in that direction, and in hot haste preparations were made for giving the enemy a hot reception. Only to abruptly cease as the clear notes of a bugle came floating through the night.

It was a scouting force of United States soldiers under command of a grizzled veteran on whose shoulders rested the bars of a captain.

The Roundhead advanced to meet him, and explanations were quickly made. The captain listened in silence, but shook his head at the end.

"You know how strict our orders are, Mr. Cromwell. We have no option. We are obliged to turn back all persons who are trying to cross the river as invaders. I know you have suffered terribly, but that would hardly let me out at headquarters."

"I am going to follow the abductors of my women-folk, wherever that trail leads, if I have to fight my way through the entire army."

The captain glanced quickly around, and when assured no one was within earshot, he whispered with a grim smile:

"Think all that, but don't say it in plain

words. Submit outwardly, and as soon as I decently can I'll shut my eyes when I turn my back on your party. If you're once fairly across the river, how can I swear you are not Mexicans, and on your own soil?"

That night was passed by the soldiers in bivouac alongside the Roundhead's party, and a portion of the next day passed before the captain gave word for boots and saddle. As he shook hands in parting, he uttered loud enough for all to catch his meaning:

"I'll trust your word that you're waiting here for your enemy, Cromwell. If the Mexicans try to invade Texas at this point, give a good account of them, and I'll cheerfully sign your report."

A virtual breach of orders? So much the more credit to the grizzled veteran, then.

He had passed years on the border, and no man knew better than he how terribly unjust were the rules and regulations under which he was sworn to protect—not the innocent, but the guilty.

Slowly that day crept along into dusk, and still no word came in from one of the scouting couples. All had reported save Rattleplate Rob and his partner. No news had been gathered of moment. If Javelina Juan had reached Mexico by any of the crossings visited by them, the Wild Hog had covered her tracks too cunningly for detection.

The company were engaged in discussing the question whether it would not be better to cross into Mexico that night, rather than risk the loss of another day in waiting for Rattleplate Rob to report, when a complete stranger suddenly stepped within the firelight, grinning broadly at the surprise written on the faces of those who never even suspected the proximity of an unknown until he rose up in their midst.

"I'm lookin' fer a man called Roundhead, gent's," the intruder drawled, shaking a soiled bit of paper before him.

CHAPTER XXX.

EVERY MAN HATH HIS PRICE.

"WHAT do you want with me?" sharply demanded John Cromwell, stepping forward, keenly scrutinizing that grinning face.

By no means an agreeable one, even without bringing in the dirt and grease and smut with which it was so thickly overlaid.

Thin, pinched, sharp-chinned, low-browed; a thoroughly evil countenance, full of low cunning, treachery and covetousness.

"Nothin', ef you ain't on the scent of the Wild Hog. A mighty sight ef you be," the fellow responded, still with that fixed grin on his repulsive face, though his foxy eyes were shifting quickly all about him, as though their owner more than half expected a shot or a blow.

"I am John Cromwell, sometimes called the Roundhead. As for being on the scent of the Wild Hog—are you one of that gang?"

"Make it was, boss, ef it ain't too heap trouble," grinned the rascal, holding forth the bit of paper. "When you get through readin' that talkin'-paper, mebbe you'll let me 'spain the rest."

The Roundhead opened the paper, giving a start and smothering a cry as he recognized the handwriting.

"Look to this fellow, please," he muttered, hoarsely, then turned abruptly away, picking up a blazing brand to serve him as a torch.

There is no especial need of recording here what his eyes so greedily devoured. They were the lines written by Mrs. Cromwell, while under duress; but there could be no doubting the full earnestness with which she had penned them. As he read, John Cromwell could imagine the fierce threats through which Juanita Sandoval had extorted that plea for his remaining on Texan soil.

But there were a few lines added in an altogether different hand, which the Roundhead read over and over before he could fully understand their real meaning.

"You will act wisely in heeding this warning, John," the lines ran: "The lives of your loved ones hang on your next move. Not yours; if I wanted that, I could have taken it a dozen times over while creeping through your camp as I have, before placing this where your eyes will be sure to rest upon it. Think of that, John! Your beloved Juanita has been within reach of your arms—has even listened to your anguished moans as you slept, and sleeping dreampot of your family—in the grip of the Wild Hog!"

At the foot of these lines was rudeiy drawn the head of a peccary.

When he had mastered the contents, the Roundhead folded the paper and thrust it into his bosom, then turned back to confront the stranger to whom he was indebted for its receipt.

"You brought this note; do you know who wrote the lines inside?"

"Mebbe I could guess, but guesses ain't known'. All I'm dead sure of is, that it was guy me with orders to drap it whar you'd be dead sart'in to find it, boss."

"Javelina Juan handed it to you?"

Tom Dobler hesitated, flashing a sly glance

into that hard, expressionless face before venturing:

"Ef a critter goes wrong once, boss, ain't they no show fer him to hit off the straight trail no more? Ef I've jumped the gang fer good?"

"In this note is a hint that Javelina Juan delivered it with his own hand. How do you explain that?"

"Jest a gag, boss! I was told fer to play snake on tel I could drap that bit o' writin' whar they sart'in find it, but I wasn't on no 'sideration to show so much as hide nur ha'r while doin' of it."

"You failed to steal through our lines, then?"

Tom Dobler grinned more widely than ever, and something like a sneer was underneath his prompt response:

"Waal, boss, I manidged to git purty nigh to ye afore them lines made me show up, didn't I?"

"L'ave him in the grip o' me fisth, Crum'll, dear!" spluttered Jerry Fits, pushing forward. "L'ave 'im take Jurry Fits as father confessor, an' I'll go bail he'll find the roight length av his toonge, an' squall so loud I'll niver have to break the sale av confession! The dirthy divil! it gives me fingers the itch joost to luk at 'im!"

"Pinch, an' I'll die mum as a clam, bcs:!" doggedly muttered the fellow, but visibly shrinking from the fat enthusiast. "Treat me white, an' I'll give good valie fer honest pay!"

The Roundhead signed two of his men to stand guard over the fellow, then drew apart with his lieutenants for consultation. He briefly told them the tenor of the lines written by the Wild Hog, and showed them plainly that Javelina Juan had instructed his messenger to keep out of sight while delivering the note.

"He could have done that, far more easily than he stole into our very midst without detection. I half believe he is ready to sell out his master, if properly approached."

"Divil save 'im from *that*, now!" spluttered voluble Jerry. "Moore loike he's layin' a trappoor the poile av us! Why wouldn't them worruds be part av the thrick, an' rade thrust back-ind foorst?"

Jerry had a few backers in this opinion, but the majority sided with the Roundhead. At all events, it could do no harm to hear what the rascal had to say for himself.

Acting on this resolve, the Roundhead confronted Tom Dobler.

"You ask to be treated white. What do you mean by that?"

"Fair pay for honest news, boss," was the prompt response.

"What news can you give us?"

"Heap sight, boss! But fu'st, afore I say just what or how much, I ax your word o' honor that you won't fall to an' stretch my thrapple when you've squeeze me out dry!"

"I'll give you a worse death than hanging, if I find you are trying to lead us into a trap," with cold sternness. "If you are sincere in your offer, and can furnish any valuable information, I pledge you my word as a man to not only let you go free, but fill your hand with gold, besides."

Tom Dobler gazed keenly, searchingly into that hard-set face for a brief space before speaking. Full of treachery himself, he could not readily credit another with honesty of purpose. But he had ventured too far to halt at any ordinary risk.

"I'll go ye on it, anyhow, boss," he declared, firmly. "It cain't be no wuss then killin', an' I'm runnin' away from that already."

"You were one of the party under Javelina Juan? You helped to raid my ranch and carry off my women-folk?" sternly demanded Cromwell.

"No, I didn't, boss," glibly lied the frightened rascal. "I was on yender side, all the time, until the Wild Hog come back with the ledgies. Cross the heart o' me ef I ever done any wuss then that."

"Why have you deserted the gang? Why offer to sell them out?"

"Beca'se I hed to slope or wake up some black night with a knife through the ribs o' me, boss! I cut a critter called Pedro, an' his fellers hed it in fer me—big! They ain't the stan'-up sort, an' so—waal, I reckoned I'd be jest as safe out o' the red-pepper kentry."

"You are willing to betray your master, then?"

"Ef you ax it, boss," with a grin.

"Did Javelina Juan cross at this point?"

Dobler shook his head negatively, explaining the course of the Wild Hog, which has already been described. The Wild Hog, with the two captives, had separated from the main body while still far from the river, and by harder riding had taken the *detour*, and still been in time to meet the thieves as they crossed at this point with the stolen herd.

"They was a young feller jumped in onto us, when nobody wasn't lookin' over yender, an' tried his level best fer to tote off the wimmen, boss," he added. "But the boys jumped onto him, an'—waal, I do reckon they used him up, too quick."

This was about all Dobler could say in answer to the many eager questions with which he was

pelted, particularly by McFarland, whose honest soul was filled with hot grief as he drew from the fellow enough to feel sure this rash adventurer had been none other than Paul Joyce, master of the Pea Jay Ranch.

Dobler had not time to find out whether or no the young man had been slain outright, though such was his impression, for Javelina Juan turned him off with the note which he was to deliver to Cromwell.

Once more the Roundhead resumed his cross-examination, making the fellow minutely describe the location of the half-ruined hacienda, to which Javelina Juan had arranged to retreat, sending her gang on to lay a false trail for the enemy, should they venture across the river in spite of her grim warning. He declared that not more than a dozen men were likely to be found on guard at the den and probably only half as many.

"The boss feels safe enough, ye see, fer I reckon he counts me 'bout his safest, closest tongue in the pack," the traitor grinned, in conclusion. "But it's a dog's life, take it at the best, an' mighty heap wuss sence I hed to carve up Pedro. An' so—waal, I thought I'd try to live honest fer a change."

"Will ye listhen to the loikes av *that*, now!" indignantly cried Jerry Fits. "Play honest—that dirthy divil? Then I'm afther tainin' vilin' in mesilf, sooner nor be avenged up wid the loikes av *him*! The b'astly impidince av the avil, grinnin' scut!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

SIPPING THE CUP OF VENGEANCE.

THERE was the very essence of triumphant malignancy in the voice of Juanita Sandoval as she pronounced those words, and as though they sounded particularly grateful to her own ears, she repeated:

"Ay, my frail, drooping lily! When next you meet Pablo Joyce, you will be a blushing bride, and on his arm will rest his wife! Canst see her face, little one? Canst recognize those eyes of jet, so softened and yet brilliant with love? Canst call the name under which thou didst first meet the bride?"

Faith struggled feebly in that painful grasp, looking in vain for the aperture through which she had for so short a time been permitted to look upon the face of Paul Joyce—still living, still able to pronounce her name with anxious love almost smothering his voice! But the wall was once more an even blank, and with a chilling fear that it had all been but a vision, that it was nothing but a mocking fancy of a failing brain, she gave a low, choking cry and would have sunk to the earthen floor but for the strong arm of the Wild Hog.

"Give her to me—my poor, murdered child!" gasped Mrs. Cromwell, no longer dreading that glittering dagger, no longer seeing aught but her falling one, whose death would be her death.

Even Juanita seemed startled for the moment, and without a word of objection permitted the mother to take possession of her child. In silence she watched Mrs. Cromwell bear Faith to the couch of skins, and it was her yellow, bony hand that pushed water within reach of the sorrowing parent.

After all, she did not wish to carry her vengeance on these helpless ones too far at the outset. Least of all was she anxious to kill the girl on whom her son had set his covetous eyes.

In her lust for revenge on all who bore the name of the man to whom she attributed all her past misfortunes—but for whom she even believed her life might have been kept free of sin and sorrow, crime and bloodshed—she forgot that all women were not cast in her mold, strong to bear, hard to wound in mind as in heart.

Faith Cromwell sighed faintly, then seemed to drop into a dull, heavy slumber, with her head pillow'd upon her mother's bosom, with tears moistening the long lashes, like some little child who has sobbed itself to sleep.

The Wild Hog was almost wonderingly watching this, when from the other room came the sound of angry cries, mingling with the sound of chains. And then, sharp, full of fierce anguish, the name:

"Faith! Faith Cromwell! Devils! if you have dared to harm one—"

Again the clink of chains, mingling with the sound of a desperate struggle which even those thick walls failed to muffle.

With a vicious curse in her native tongue, Juanita Sandoval sprang toward the door, just as Faith Cromwell started up in her mother's arms with a frightened cry. The voice of her lover had penetrated that dull, lethargic stupor, and breaking away from those loving arms, she crossed the room and beat upon that hard wall with her hands, trying to open the cunningly hidden trap, calling upon the name of Paul Joyce.

Was it through accident? Had she touched the concealed spring by which the narrow slit was opened?

Faith never stopped to ask that question, but with a panting cry put her face to the hole, just in time to see a door open and admit the Wild Hog, accompanied by two stout servants, who

at once leaped to the aid of the gray-haired guard, who was holding the chained man back on his bench.

"Paul—my love! Spare him—do not—"

Her throat seemed to close too tight even for breath, as Juanita Sandoval flashed a malignant glance toward the aperture, then cried out harshly to her tools:

"Lash the obstinate dog into silence! Strike—and strike hard, unless ye would taste of the lash yourselves!"

The gray-haired guard locked his hands around the neck of the captive, throwing his weight backward, with his feet slipping beneath the bench, thus removing his own person from peril as the two stout knaves produced each a cruel quirt and swiftly obeyed their mistress.

"Devil—merciless fiend from—"

The grip upon his throat would permit no more, and choked into silence, Paul Joyce could do no more than bear his cruel punishment, each stroke of the whips sounding horribly clear.

On opposite sides of the bench stood the men, striking in swift rotation, each blow seeming to cut through the ragged garments worn by the captive, and dim though the light was, Faith Cromwell caught the sight of red blood flowing from his broken skin!

That was too much for her to bear, in her weakened condition, and with a choking shriek, the poor girl fell away from the aperture, only saved from an ugly shock on the earthen floor by the trembling arms of her mother.

"Enough, my gallant peccaries!" cried the Wild Hog, lifting her hand as she saw that further torture would be wasted on the maiden. "Leave yet a little life in his carcass for future amusement!"

She turned and left the room, hastening at once to that adjoining, her lust of vengeance only whetted by what had thus far happened. She opened the door, only to be met by Mrs. Cromwell, nearly driven mad by the fear that her poor child had succumbed before these repeated blows.

"You have murdered my child! I will avenge her, or—"

With a harsh laugh the female tigress shook off that frenzied grasp, thrusting the mother from her so violently that she reeled and was saved from falling only by striking against the opposite wall.

"Would you, poor, weak, crazy fool! Would you lift hand against the Wild Hog? Have I not yet broken your spirit? Have I—"

"Paul—mother—heaven have mercy!"

Mrs. Cromwell turned to where her daughter lay on the couch, forgetting all else for the moment. Juanita Sandoval watched them, her thin lips curling back until her white teeth gleamed wolfishly. She drew closer to the couch, laughing aloud as Faith, recognizing her, gave a choking scream of horror, then fell back as though a corpse.

The poor mother sunk on her knees beside the couch, sobbing, moaning like one well-nigh bereft of her senses. Juanita struck her sharply on the shoulder, saying:

"You idiot! Is she not better off than you? If you are wise, you will pray to be laid by her side before I—"

With an almost maniacal shriek, the tortured woman sprung to her feet and attacked her tormentor. Juanita, taken by surprise, staggered back with blood marking her yellow face, crying aloud for help.

Perhaps it was well for her that the two stout servants who had so pitilessly flogged Paul Joyce at her command, were so close at hand. Perhaps it was well for Mrs. Cromwell, for the Wild Hog was drawing her ready dagger as they burst into the room and tore the two women apart. They held Mrs. Cromwell helpless, looking at Juanita for orders.

For a single breath the infuriated creature seemed on the point of springing forward and burying that glittering blade in the heart of the woman whose hand had drawn her blood; but then she dropped the weapon, hoarsely panting:

"Away—away with her! Wait until I come to give further orders!"

"My child—do not part us now that she is dead!" gasped the poor woman, but the slaves only hurried her off the faster, one broad palm closing over her lips and stifling her frantic cries.

All through this frightful scene, Faith Cromwell lay as if dead, stricken down by the sight of the terrible creature who had so pitilessly tortured her overtired brain. And Juanita, fearful lest she had carried her vengeance too far, set about restoring the poor girl.

With success in the end, and as Faith came back to her senses, the Wild Hog felt her lust for revenge again getting the upper hand. She knew that her son, Pablo Sandoval, would never forgive her for going so far, if he ever learned the whole truth, but from what had already passed between them, she began to realize that this seemingly weak, frail child possessed a remarkable power of endurance.

Faith's first words were of her mother, and she struggled feebly against the yellow hands that pushed her back upon the couch.

"She is gone—the tiger-cat!" harshly grated Juanita, one hand pointing to her bruised and bleeding face. "You see! It is blood—*my* blood! Drawn by the hand of that tiger-cat, your mother! She dared to strike me—*me*, Javelina Juan, the Wild Hog! Dared to draw my blood with blows such as a slave might receive from the hands of a master!"

"Mother—take me to my mother!" moaned the poor child, shrinking in terror from that passion-convulsed face, those glowing eyes, the claw-like fingers that twitched and curved and seemed about to close upon her throat.

Juanita Sandoval laughed shrilly, mockingly, yet with a vicious rage that caused her figure to quiver and shake as though in a chill.

"Do you not comprehend, little fool? Can you not see this blood still fresh upon my face? Are you blind, that these bruises escape your vision? Your mother! She gave me these—blows such as one gives an egg-stealing cur! And I? I give death for a blow—*always*!"

Once more poor Faith fell back, her senses deserting her.

CHAPTER XXXII.

NEVER TOO LATE TO HOPE.

WHEN her senses returned to her, Faith Cromwell found Juanita Sandoval gone, her place occupied by a withered old crone, who soothingly bade her rest, and gently forced her to drink from a cup which contained a bitter potion before consenting to answer her anxious queries as to her poor mother.

And then, even while the old woman was brokenly explaining that her mother was not far away, the sleeping draught overpowered her, and she knew no more until late the next day.

When she finally aroused, she felt far stronger and more like her old self than she had at any time since torn from her home. And when her withered guardian bade her eat, she made quite a hearty meal. Little wonder that! It was almost the first morsel she had taken since falling into the pitiless hands of the Wild Hog!

Scarcely had she finished this meal, than Juanita, dressed after the same gaudy fashion as on the previous day, entered the chamber and signed the nurse to take her departure.

"You are looking better, little angel!" she said, with a half-mocking, half-envious laugh as a flush of eager expectation leaped into that lovely face. "Are you feeling strong enough to bear up through an affecting interview with—"

"My mother! take me to her, I beg of you, madame!" chokingly cried the poor girl, sinking upon her knees with clasped and uplifted hands. "I ask no more than that! Take me to my dear mother!"

"You can bend your proud knees, then? And to the Wild Hog?" laughed Juanita, her gleaming eyes and curling lips betraying how sweet she found her vengeance on these helpless ones. "You would even kiss *my* hands—my blood-wet hands! You would do even that, for your mother?"

"Pity—mercy!" sobbed the girl, her head drooping, hot tears dropping on the hard floor. "Why will you be so cruel? Why torture us so frightfully? What harm have we ever wrought you—my poor mother and I?"

"Nothing of your noble father? Why not ask in *his* name, little one?" sneeringly cried the Wild Hog, her bony hands clinching tightly at the thought. "But it is better not, my angel," recovering herself by a desperate effort. "Better let the sleeping dog lie in peace! I am on my good behavior this day, and wish not another ugly scene like that of yesterday!"

"You will let me see my mother, then?" faltered Faith, arising.

"I will let you see—one whom you dearly love, my angel!" with a low laugh that was full of mockery. "I will let you see—was it a mother who was uppermost in your thoughts yesterday?"

Faith gasped, one hand rising to her wildly throbbing heart. She turned pale as a corpse, and only for the support of the wall, must have fallen to the ground. And like one in a dizzy dream, she heard Juanita Sandoval add:

"Am I not kind? What would Pablo say? Pablo, who worships the dust which steals your dainty footprint? Pablo the bold, the gallant, the tireless, the sleepless-eyed Pablo of the keen tusks! Pablo, who trusts his love to his mother's watchful care, while he cunningly weaves toils in which to catch the grim old Roundhead and his bullies! What would Pablo say if he knew his mother was betraying his trust? Was even now reaching out her hand to lead his lovely bride—that-is-to-be, into the presence of his favored rival?"

Still dizzy, still like one in a dream, Faith Cromwell yielded to that cold, clammy grasp, passing from the room along a short passage, to enter another where—

"Faith! my angel! my love! Ye fiend from Tartarus! have you murdered my love—my angel?"

She recognized the voice of Paul Joyce, and tried to answer it. She felt that sickening dizziness grow greater—then all was a blank.

For how long, Faith Cromwell could never

tell, never thought of asking. For in her ears rung the eager, pleading accents of the man whom she loved beyond all else upon earth—the voice of Paul Joyce!

She was sitting in a chair, placed only a short distance from the bench on which, though now in a sitting posture, her lover was chained. She strove to rise, to clasp him in her arms, to sob out her mingled joy and grief on his manly breast, but in vain. And then she realized that this was but another satanic device of the Wild Hog, but another method of torture!

Almost near enough for their outstretched hands to touch each other, if they had not been deprived of their use. So near, yet as well with the thick wall between them.

And though the Wild Hog was not within sight, the lovers had not been left alone with each other. The gray-headed guard was squatting in a corner of the room, furtively watching them through the smoke of his cigar.

"Faith, my precious one!" huskily uttered the man in chains, looking so pale, so haggard, as though he had suffered torture enough to drive a weaker brain off its balance. "Are you conscious at last? Can you understand me if I speak low—can you control your emotions if I venture to show you a ray of hope for both you and I?"

"Paul—it is you?" faltered the maiden, hardly realizing the truth after all she had undergone.

"What there is left of me, little girl," with a short, harsh laugh and brief darkening of his pale countenance. "But never mind that—never mind what I have had to undergo through the satanic cruelty of the Wild Hog! Some day, perhaps—"

He cut himself short, as though fearful of saying too much, and lowered his tones, speaking slowly, distinctly, yet hardly loud enough for any listening ears on the outside of that chamber to understand:

"Try to clear your brain, little woman. Try to comprehend what I have to tell you, for I may never have another chance before—the Wild Hog may come in upon us at any moment, now!"

"I will try, Paul," faintly replied the poor girl, yet in the same breath she murmured:

"Mother—my poor mother! Can you tell me—"

"Hist!" sharply breathed he, flashing a glance toward the closed door.

But that barrier did not open, and he hurriedly added:

"I thought I heard a step at the door, but if so, the Wild Hog is still listening. I must make haste, else she will come before I can make you understand that there is yet a chance for our escaping from her evil clutches!"

"Listen, little one! You have not forgotten how I failed in trying to carry you off, that night. It was a fool's act, for I ought to have waited longer—waited and watched for a more favorable opportunity."

"But I was more than half-mad, little one! Think of it, Faith! Your father charged me with having a hand in your abduction! He swore that I was at the bottom of this foul outrage! I, who love you so madly! I, who was then miles away, on my road home from San Antonio!"

"I swore to him that I would never rest until I could restore you to his arms. I hastened home for my best horse, for gold and diamonds to use in case I should have to use cunning in setting you free. The gold was taken from me when I was beaten down by the devils, that night, but the diamonds—Faith, they are what will unlock the doors of our prison! They have won over Tio Tomas—the graybeard, yonder! For the bright baubles he has sworn to set us both at liberty this very night, if possible!"

As though exhausted by his own excitement, his head sunk back on the bench, his broad bosom rising and falling in hurried gasps.

For the moment Faith forgot all else in her solicitude for him, and she struggled to rise from her chair to kneel at his side.

"Caution—silence!" panted her lover, feebly raising his head again, though he looked ghastly pale, as if his sufferings had sorely worn upon him. "Control yourself, my angel, else all may fail us, even yet! If the Wild Hog should suspect—"

"We would all pray for death, long before its coming, senor and senorita!" croaked the guard through his veil of blue smoke.

"Not my death!" harshly laughed the other, his brows contracting with a dark frown. "For me a still worse fate than that! Think of it, Faith! That she-devil swears that I shall marry her! That if I refuse, she will put you to the most hideous torture before my eyes—and I all powerless to save you, darling!"

Faith shuddered violently, but managed to control her emotions, lent strength by this horrible prospect which might be turned into reality by an incautious movement on her part.

"I will be strong—I will guard my face, my lips, dear Paul. If it can only be—if we can only escape from that horrible wretch!"

"We will, little one, and this very night, if you keep your nerves from giving way. Tio Tomas has prepared everything, and—"

"Does my mother know? Will she be ready too?" eagerly asked Faith.

The eager light faded out of that pale face, and her lover let his eyes droop as though fearing to let her see what was written therein. If so, he might better have risked a lie, for Faith divined the worst.

"Tell me—my poor mother is—is not—"

"She is with the saints, señorita," replied the grizzled guard.

With a low, gasping moan, Faith Cromwell swooned in her chair.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WATCHING FOR AN OPENING.

RATTLEPATE ROB and Knight Latchford lost no time in acting on the information so reluctantly given them by the Mexican spy, barely waiting to see his novel float bear him down the river until the shadows swallowed him up, then mounting their animals and re-crossing the Rio Grande.

Leaving the beaten path, they circled around the dirty little town in which their capture had been effected, for now that they had a definite point in view, they were more than ever anxious to avoid observation on the part of the natives.

"We're good enough Greasers, so far as looks go, pardner," laughed Rattleplate as they rode along. "But that blessed tongue of yours is heap sight too stiff and clumsy for fooling even a deaf yallerbelly!"

"And the smell, Robert!" earnestly uttered Latchford. "A crippled tongue might pass, but never an honest scent—never!"

They rode briskly through that entire night, for their horses had done little work since striking the river, and did not require favoring. They paused for a short rest and feed when the sun arose, and Rattleplate convinced himself that he had not gone astray during the night.

"I hardly thought it possible, but there's nothing like giving yourself the worst possible count; it makes the total feel so much better, pardner!" he laughed, in growing spirits.

Yet neither of the two adventurers made the common mistake of too greatly underrating the peril and difficulty attending the enterprise on which they were engaged.

"It'll be nip and tuck, pardner," seriously uttered Rattleplate Rob, as they remounted their animals and continued their ride. "From this time on, we can set down everybody we run up against as being one of the Wild Hog's pigs; if not actually a member of the gang, plenty willing to carry word that strangers are scouting about the den!"

"Then we'll have to bag all those unfortunate rascals whose ill-fate brings them within eye-shot, Robert," coolly responded the detective.

But fate seemed propitious, and though the scouts neglected no proper precautions, they proved wholly unnecessary. During the whole of their ride they never once sighted a human being save themselves. The country seemed completely deserted by all of the human race.

"If it was ever inhabited!" muttered Latchford, glancing around in huge contempt for such a desert.

"So much the better for us, pardner," laughed Rattleplate Rob. "And so much the wiser Javelina Juan, too, come to think. He has the range pretty much to himself, and runs heap less danger of entertaining spies unawares."

It was only a little while before the noon hour that Rattleplate Rob announced the propriety of coming to a halt and leaving their animals under cover while they crept on afoot to make an observation.

As ever since leaving "a white man's country" to step foot on Mexican soil, Latchford had no objections to offer. The young ranger was commander now, and he merely a private, trained to blind obedience.

The horses were stripped of their equipage and hitched in the midst of a thicket, where they were given a feed of coarse grass cut for that purpose by their masters, then Rattleplate Rob led the way to a point from whence a fair view was to be obtained of the half-ruined hacienda in which, as he believed and the Mexican Spy had sworn, Javelina Juan had sought refuge and concealment.

Many years ago this had been an unusually fine place, well-kept and profitable to its owner; but great changes had taken place since those days, and the hacienda itself was almost as complete a wreck to the eye as the once fertile fields surrounding it.

"What's the matter with Owls?" muttered Latchford, after scanning the ruins. "I don't believe even a decent peccary would demean itself by taking up its residence in such a gloomy den!"

Rattleplate Rob made no reply. His handsome face was pale, his dark eyes filled with an anxious light as he looked in vain for some sign of human occupancy. He had cast his all upon a die, and were he to fail now! If he had suffered himself to be misled by that spy! If this den was as deserted as it looked!

Something of this struck Knight Latchford, but he held his peace as he read the thoughts of

his comrade written on that anxious face. If their doubts should prove reality, time enough when they solved themselves. He would not hasten the blow, knowingly.

Rattleplate Rob cautiously scouted around the building, viewing it as completely as possible from every side before expressing his opinion. And this inspection was pretty thorough, though the hacienda stood in the center of a cleared space of ground, with no cover large enough to hide a human being within two hundred yards of its dingy walls.

"Shall we call them Owls, Robert?" asked Latchford when the circuit was complete and they paused at the point from whence they had secured their first look at the hacienda. "Owls snooze in the daytime, history tells us, and I don't know where a gang of 'em could find a spot less calculated to disturb their daily dreams."

"Owls or Hogs, it's win or lose a wife right here!" muttered Rattleplate Rob, doggedly, fighting against his own fears. "And you're in up to your chin, too, pardner! If your game isn't at or making for this hole, you can give him over as belonging to the Roundhead!"

The two men settled down for a spell of patient watching and waiting, for they had done all they dared attempt while the light of day endured. When night should fall, provided their doubts were not solved for good or evil before that hour, Rattleplate declared that he meant to steal up to the hacienda itself, and if necessary scale the partly crumbling wall which surrounded all save the front of the building.

But, luckily, this was not found necessary. A couple of hours before sunset, they were electrified by seeing a man appear in front of the building, strolling lazily back and forth for a few minutes, then vanishing inside!

Rattleplate Rob at once regained all his usual flow of spirits, and Knight Latchford felt at liberty to resume his cynical doubts.

"You can't begin to faze me now, pardner," laughed the young ranger, stretching his athletic form out on the dry, warm ground in an easy position, though still keeping close watch upon the building in which he now felt confident his prize was lying. "I'm just as sure we're on the right track as if I had the throat of Javelina Juan between the two hands o' me."

Only that one brief glimpse of human life was vouchsafed them, and as the sun began to hide itself, even Rattleplate Rob grew more serious.

He had counted on a chance to capture some one of the inmates, out of whose lips, willing or unwilling, he might squeeze positive information concerning the Wild Hog and her captives. Without such information, it would be almost suicidal to make an effort. Yet—they dared not wait much longer.

"I'm only wondering why the Roundhead has not put in an appearance before this!" muttered Latchford. "Can it be possible that, as the Greaser intimated, he has been led into some cunning snare along a false trail?"

"It's Faith and her mother I'm thinking of most. Cromwell is better able to care for himself. If I only knew for dead sure they were held inside that den, I'd—"

"Butt your head against a stone wall, of course!" muttered Latchford. "Or, even worse, run up against the point of a knife."

"It's all in a lifetime, pardner," with a short, grim laugh, his dark eyes glowing redly. "I'll wait and watch until sleeping-time, but if we don't catch a clam by then, I'm going to find out what's inside that building. Mark that down, pardner, if you like."

The sun sunk out of sight, and still the hacienda was silent. Not a light appeared. Not a sound came from its dingy walls. Not a soul tried to enter or to leave it, so far as the two adventurers could see.

During this interval, Rattleplate Rob was racking his brain in hopes of hitting on some plausible scheme for learning the whole truth without actually sacrificing his own life, and finally, in despair of anything better, he roused the half-slumbering detective to mutter:

"There's no use in waiting any longer in hopes of catching one of the servants outside, pardner. They're holed up for the night, I reckon. But we can't afford to lay 'round here four-and-twenty hours longer."

"Better that than stop until Gabriel toots his horn, Robert."

"It hasn't come to croaking yet," doggedly. "I'm going over yonder and play belated Greaser. I'll kick up such a row that they'll have to let me in. And once in, I'll butter 'em down so slick they'll never suspect—"

Knight Latchford caught his arm with a fierce grip, pointing with his free hand out across the open space lying between their covert and the hacienda.

"Look! isn't that the chance we've been waiting for, Robert?"

The light of the moon revealed several human figures just leaving the building, heading for the chaparral only a few points to the left of the two scouts, and Rattleplate Rob hurriedly muttered:

"There's only three of 'em, pard. We've got to take 'em all in. No powder, but they mustn't give even a single yelp. Kill two—keep the other for squeezing dry. Come on, Latchford!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THERE'S MANY A SLIP.

WHEN Faith Cromwell again recovered her senses she found herself once more in the chamber which she had occupied with her mother, and with the same withered crone in attendance upon her. As before, the hag tried to coax her to drink of a soothing potion, but this time the poor child refused with unexpected stubbornness.

Juanita Sandoval came in response to the call of the nurse, but she also failed, though her manner was so much more gentle than any she had seen fit to betray up to that moment.

"You must obey, little one. Your nerves require rest. You will be little better than a fading wreck when my son comes to greet his bride unless you can gain some natural repose."

"He must blame his mother, then!" flashed Faith, with a shudder of most intense loathing as she struck away the yellow hand that would have patted her pale cheek. "Where is my mother? What have you done to her? I know!" and she buried her face in the spotted skins, sobbing spasmodically. "Murdered—my poor mother!"

"Listen to me, little one," quietly added the Wild Hog, showing an unusual degree of patience for one of her fiery nature. "You are deceived. I lied to you yesterday. That was because my proud blood boiled with shame to think I—I, Juavita Sandoval! I, Javelina Juan—had permitted a blow that drew blood from my face to go unavenged. Yes, I lied to you when I swore that blow had been wiped out by a death. Your mother yet lives. She has not even been injured, beyond separation from you, her daughter."

Faith lifted her head to gaze through her painful tears into the speaker's face, trying to read the truth there. Juanita met her gaze unflinchingly, and even forced a smile as she waited.

"Take me to her—bring her to me then!" passionately cried the maiden. "Do this, and I will believe you—I will bless you with—"

"Will you swear to wed my son, my gallant Pablo, for reward?" the woman eagerly asked, her dark eyes glowing like living coals.

That question brought back a vision of Paul Joyce—recalled his cheering words of that strange interview—and Faith again sunk on the couch, hiding her face lest her eyes betray her thoughts.

Juanita Sandoval sprung to her feet with a harsh laugh, saying:

"You want time for thought? You want time to decide whether you love your mother better than yourself? So be it, little one. I will go and leave you alone for now. On the morrow my gallant Pablo will come to claim his bride, and then—"

The sentence was lost in a mocking laugh, and Faith shivered anew as she heard the heavy door close with a clang.

Twice the old nurse visited her chamber, to place food and drink at her disposal, but not a word could she extract from those sunken lips. A simple shake of the head was all, and the hag seemed anxious to leave the room as soon as her duties would permit.

Night descended, and for the hundredth time Faith desisted from her efforts to discover and work the hidden spring by which the narrow slit was opened in the wall separating her prison from that in which she had first seen Paul Joyce so heavily chained. In her anxiety she had repeatedly called to him, softly at first, but then with growing energy, as no reply came to relieve her haunting doubts and fears, until she gave over in mingled despair and dread lest her cries bring Juanita Sandoval to the chamber to inflict still further torture.

Her nerves were so sadly shaken, her spirits so crushed by all she had been called upon to endure since that awful night at Rump Ranch, that Faith Cromwell began to doubt that she had really been in the presence of her lover, or that he had promised her freedom that very night. It was all part of her crazed dreams!

She was lying on her couch, vainly trying to combat this growing doubt, when the sound of her prison door being opened, caused her head to lift and a low, gasping, choking cry rose in her throat, for by the dim light afforded by the single candle lent her, she recognized the pale face and athletic figure of the very man who figured most prominently in her dizzy brain!

"Paul! is it—"

"My darling!" came the passionate response, and in another moment the sobbing maiden was lying on his bosom, clasped tightly to his heart, his hot lips pressing kisses on her tear-stained face.

"Be happy, my noble and lovely children, both!" croaked Tio Tomas, leaning back against the closed door, his head on one side, his little eyes half-closed as he beamed benevolently upon the couple, his face half-hidden by the blue smoke of his cigar.

Even in that blissful moment, Faith was startled by the knowledge of a third presence, and blushingly drew back from those eager lips.

"It is only Uncle Tom, little one," laughed her lover, rightly interpreting her thoughts.

"Only the fine old rascal who has consented to see us safely outside this den of Wild Hogs!"

"And *he* is blind, senorita, senor!" croaked the fine old rascal, with an owl-like leer in his bleared eyes that hinted strongly at the bottle. "There is a bright jewel fastened over each of his eyes, and he can see naught that he ought not to see. Only—senor?"

"Well, you rascal?"

"Is it not too lovely a night without to linger inside? Will it not be as well if the senorita be a long ways from this chamber when the Wild Hog opens her eyes once more?"

"And—my mother, Paul?" faltered Faith, her face paling at the thought. "I cannot leave her, even—even to go with you!"

She was drawn closer to his breast, and he soothingly uttered:

"Your mother is well, Faith, and Tio Tomas unconsciously lied when he declared that she was with the saints."

"And—she will go with us?"

"I wish that was possible, little one," still more soothingly, his own face paling a trifle as he saw how cruelly her revived hopes were drooping. "If she was only under this roof, I would risk everything in order to take her with you, to freedom. But—"

"You are deceiving me—she is dead—murdered!"

"I swear to you she is not dead, Faith! I swear by my love for you—the most sacred oath I can devise, little one! I swear that she is not dead, nor even harmed in aught save being sent away from your side. The Wild Hog sent her out of this building to another retreat. Just where, I am yet in ignorance; but Tio Tomas has sworn to discover her place of confinement, and then I will rescue her, I will restore her to your arms, or give up my own life in the attempt! Can I say or do more than this, little girl?"

Faith struggled to answer him, but her organs of speech refused to obey her weak will. Seeing how feeble all this excitement had made her, her lover motioned to Tio Tomas, who handed him a flask of liquor. With gentle force he induced the maiden to taste quite freely of the stimulant, which rapidly lent her strength so essential to her escape from that loathsome den.

Once more Tio Tomas blandly insinuated that they had best make more haste, but his words were hardly heeded, though Faith caught the encouraging whisper:

"Not until you have regained your strength, my precious! There is no particular haste. I took care to see that the old rascal had performed his duty to perfection. The Wild Hog and all her pigs are fast locked in a drugged sleep—may it be without awakening!"

There was a vicious fervor in the last words, not surprising when that flogging scene is recalled, even though the deadly hope dropped into the ears of his beloved.

With the brandy tingling through her person, lending her strength and seeming to clear and steady her overtired brain, Faith, now that she was convinced her mother was not in the same building, felt a nervous eagerness to leave the place forever.

"Let us go, dear Paul," she murmured, yet shrinking back as the old rascal flung open her prison door.

"Still in fear of that yellow hog, little one?" her lover murmured, reassuringly. "Never give her another thought, unless you can bring to hope that her sleep may last until the crack o' doom!"

With his strong arm about her waist, and his other hand clasping hers so warmly, so tenderly, Faith mustered up her courage and crossed the threshold of the chamber in which she had suffered such torment. She shivered spasmodically as she caught sight of her old nurse lying in an awkward heap just outside the door, but was somewhat reassured when the hog muttered incoherently as Tio Tomas gave her a rude push with his foot, rolling her withered carcass out of the path.

"Not dead, but sleeping!" laughed the young man, as they passed by. "Cruel Tomas! Unhappy Paquita! And she loved you so dearly, uncle!"

"P'st!" with a gesture of drunken disgust wrinkling his yellow face. "Am I a mole? Have I not eyes? Are all women so dry and harsh and withered up as Paquita?"

"Never mind the rest, old owl!" sharply muttered the lover, as the guide squared himself to further elaborate his scorn for such as she. "It is difficult to draw breath in this atmosphere! Show the way to purer air—the air of freedom!"

Tio Tomas led the way into another room, where Faith gave a low gasp of terror as her eyes fell upon the motionless figure of Juanita Sandoval lying upon a low couch, looking ghastly and corpse-like in her gaudy finery.

"If it was not *for you*, little one!" muttered her lover, one hand dropping hers to clutch the knife which accompanied the brace of revolvers at his waist. "She is a devil, not a woman! It would be a blessing to all mankind if—lead on, you rascal!" flashing a hot glance at their conductor. "If I remain here another moment,

I'll have to send my blade in search of what serves her as a heart!"

Frightened, Tio Tomas hurried away, and a few moments later they crossed the outer threshold, standing under the twinkling stars, the bright moon.

"At last!" exclaimed the young man, stooping to press a hot kiss on the lips of the trembling maiden. "Free at last, my precious!"

"Will I make haste still, senor?" ventured Tio Tomas, edging beyond reach of that heavy hand as though he expected to feel its weight in a far from agreeable manner.

"How far is it to where you had the horses hidden?"

"Only a little ways, master," was the prompt response. "Only over yonder in the edge of the chaparral. Shall I fetch the animals hither, senor, or will you deign to walk so far?"

"You are able to walk a short distance, Faith? It will not tire you too greatly?" he asked, tenderly.

The maiden started impulsively in the direction indicated by their grizzled guide. She would have done the same had she known the horses were a thousand miles away. She felt that she could never draw a free breath while in the shadow of that horrible place!

"I will walk," she murmured, huskily. "Now—at once! If that frightful creature should—"

"No fears of that, Faith" with a half-laugh, as he moved away from the hacienda across the level, open space. "The Wild Hog would come to meet her death! Try to banish all thoughts of her from your mind, my sweet one, and remember only that I am leading you to freedom, to the arms of your loving father—for I know he is loving, to you, in his own stern fashion, though so harsh and unreasonable in his hatred for me! But—that will all be changed now, please Heaven! He will take back his cruel words when he knows all I have dared and suffered in trying to restore you to his arms, my Faith!"

"Mother—if mother was only with us!" moaned the poor girl.

"She will be—she shall be given back to you, little woman. I vow this, on my love for you, sweetheart!"

Tio Tomas led the way into the dense thicket, following a path that led to a little opening where stood three horses. He turned as if to announce the end of their first stage, when a cry of terror left his lips at sight of several dark figures leaping upon them!

Faith shrunk back with a choking cry as she saw her lover dashed backward, his pistol exploding as he fell!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ROUNDHEAD'S REPRISAL.

ALTHOUGH the indignation of Jerry Fits was genuine enough to drive him from the spot for a time, there was enough remaining to put Tom Dobler through a thorough examination, sharpened by real or pretended information concerning the section of country in which he declared Javelina Juan had gone into hiding.

The Roundhead said little during this stage, but contented himself with keenly watching the foxy face of the volunteer traitor, trying to determine whether or no this was real, or but another cunning trick of his bitter enemy, the Wild Hog.

It was well for the rascal that he stuck to a plain story, telling the truth as far as he knew it, save in that one denial of his having taken personal part in the raid on the Rump Ranch. If he had been lying, John Cromwell would almost assuredly have detected him in the act, when his punishment would have followed swift and thorough.

Satisfied that the fellow was really stating facts, the Roundhead once more took a part in the questioning.

"Is it too late for us to reach this den of the Wild Hog's to-night, in time to effect a surprise?"

Tom Dobler promptly shook his head in the negative.

"We mought kiver the ground by hard ridin', boss, an' make it afore sun-up; but it'd be mighty close work. Ef anythin' was to turn up ag'in' us on the road—waal, ye see it ain't fur from midnight a'ready, boss!"

A little further discussion showed that the distance was too great to trust to covering it and storming the hacienda in the same night, and as Dobler declared he could pilot the company to a secure covert where they could pass the day without much risk of being discovered, the Roundhead decided to cross the river that night, and get within a few miles of the Wild Hog's den before dawn, to either capture the place by day, or lay in hiding until another night, as circumstances seemed best.

Before making his determination known to the spy, the Roundhead sent two men on a scout across the river, to make sure no ambush was being formed for their reception should they cross under his guidance. And only when one of these scouts returned with word that naught suspicious had been seen or heard, did John Cromwell give Dobler a mount and order him to lead the company across the river.

When the ford was safely crossed, Dobler was

again warned that the first indication of treachery on his part would be the signal for his immediate death, and supplemented this by naming four men whose whole care was to be that the rascal received his merited reward in case of an ambuscade.

"Ef they don't go off at hafe-cock, boss, I'm easy," laughed the ex-peccary. "Ef any trouble comes, be sure it won't be from my wantin'. I'd hate heap wuss to run up ag'in Javelina Juan then you would!"

True to his promise, Tom Dobler led the party to a secluded retreat by a winding trail through the dense chaparral, where they were snugly settled down before the first streaks of a new day were fairly visible. And in this covert the day was spent without event worthy of note, save that, acting on information given them by their guide, the Roundhead and two others reconnoitered the half-ruined hacienda, marking its weakest points, and proving that, thus far, the ex-peccary had not attempted to deceive them.

The place seemed wholly deserted, but the little party of scouts dared not risk suspicion by making a closer examination, and finally returned to the main force.

"If you have spoken as true about the inmates as of the shell, my man, I'll see that you never regret your work," coldly uttered the Roundhead. "If you have lied in that—pray that death may come to you before I return!"

Tom Dobler did not exactly comprehend this terse speech, but he stood in too great awe of this hard, cold, yet flaming-eyed man to ask many questions, content to let the sequel explain itself. But he was far more uneasy when, shortly after dark, the Roundhead caused him to be seized, bound to a stunted mesquite tree, with a stout gag ready for insertion between his vainly protesting lips.

"If you are acting all in good faith, this little inconvenience shall be considered when dealing out your reward," coldly explained the Roundhead. "If you are thinking to play me false, I'll make sure of finding you when the truth is revealed."

"I ain't lyin'—I'm playin' as white as snow, boss!" quavered the helpless rascal. "I wouldn't mind ef I knew you wouldn't fergit to ever come back this way—ef I knew you wouldn't leave me here to s'arve to death! Fer love o'—"

The Roundhead lifted his hand and the frightened rascal's jaws were forced open to admit the gag. This was secured by strong thongs leading from each side and knotted firmly at the back of his neck.

The Roundhead led the way out of the chaparral, each man holding his horse by the reins, making no attempt at riding until the thorny thicket was fairly cleared. On its outskirts Cromwell called a halt and briefly addressed his men.

He told them all he had learned during his scouting that afternoon, and the decision he had reached in consequence.

"I do not believe there can be nuch of a force within the building, though it is large enough to shelter a small army. If the entire gang was there, we would have sighted some of them, or detected something of their animals. We saw neither."

"You know my prime object is to rescue my wife and child. You know how bitterly the Wild Hog hates them, through his hatred for me. If he sees a chance of losing them, he will murder both!"

"Bedad, we won't give him toime, d'ye moind, now," said Jerry Fits.

"We'll hope for the best," gravely resumed the Roundhead. "We'll advance as near as practicable in silence, then charge up to the rear wall, where it is crumblin', and low enough for a rider to easily leap over it from the saddle. Once inside—use your knives, and make sure you are striking only enemies! If you see my dear ones, flock about them instantly, and call to me if I am not with you. As for the rest, try to capture Javelina Juan alive, for—the Wild Hog is a woman."

The Roundhead sprung into his saddle and rode briskly away, paying no attention to the amazement which his final words had aroused. Not until that instant had one other of the party so much as suspected the truth: that Javelina Juan, the River Raider, was not a man in fact as she was in semblance while on her marauding expeditions.

As he drew nearer to the hacienda, the Roundhead moderated his pace, walking their horses until fairly on the edge of the bare, level tract of ground in the middle of which the building was situated.

He paused here only long enough to again caution his followers, then gave the signal for charging.

Swiftly they swooped down upon the Wild Hog's den, only the rapid clattering of their horses' hoofs on the dry earth heralding their coming, each man so intent on the work before him that not one paid any attention to the dull, distant report of fire-arms coming apparently from the opposite side of the hacienda. Charging right up to the line of crumblin' wall, reining in their steeds and letting them go at will as they leaped over the barrier, alighting with cold steel in hand!

"Strike hard! Kill all save the women!" thundered the Roundhead as a chorus of startled, frightened, angry yells arose from the dimly-lighted building, laid open on that side now the courtyard was gained. "Death to all who resist! Life and liberty to the one who shows me where my women-folk are imprisoned!"

"Kill—beat them back!" screamed a shrill voice, and a woman in blood-red garments flashed a revolver full into the faces of the assaulting party. "Wild Hogs, to me!"

"Devil a hog am I, but it's coomin' I am in—ow-wow!"

Jerry Fits staggered back, blinded for the moment by a shot which almost set his scanty locks on fire, but he quickly recovered and with his enormous weight bore Juanita Sandoval backward with a shock that both disarmed her hands and stilled her tongue.

The few inmates fought but feebly, thoroughly demoralized by the complete surprise, and almost without resistance John Cromwell dashed from room to room, shouting aloud the names of his wife and daughter.

Through the wild tumult he caught a faint shriek, and locating it by means of a heavy door, he hurled his Herculean frame again and again against the barrier, shouting out the name of his wife. Her cries answered him back, and seemed to lend him more than mortal power. Another fierce rush, and he stumbled into the room over the splintered door.

"John—at last!"

From the bench on which Paul Joyce had lain helplessly under the lash of the Wild Hog's slaves, Mrs. Cromwell feebly lifted her head as she gasped forth these words. She could do no more, for those heavy chains were now upon her limbs, and only her head was free to move itself.

With a savage gasp of deadly rage, the Roundhead lifted the bench and its precious burden in his strong arms, bearing them out of that stifling prison before uttering another word.

Out through the open front door, through the widely-swinged gate, he strode, knowing that the victory was won by his gallant comrades, but with something like death fastening itself upon his heart.

Where was Faith? Where was his beloved daughter?

"Glory to the day, annyhow!" cried Jerry Fits, rushing out after him, his face blackened with burnt powder from the shot which had so nearly cut his career forever short. "Sure I've ketched her! Jerry Fits is the b'y, whin it coomes to ketchin' the fair six, so he—"

"Faith—you've found my child?" hoarsely panted the Roundhead, leaping forward and clutching the master of Shamrock Ranch in a vise-like grip. "Where is she—take me to her, man! Don't you see I'm more than half mad already? Don't you see—where is she?"

"Devil a wan o' me knows that same, sure!" soberly muttered poor Jerry, all his enthusiasm gone. "I was m'arin' the Woild Hag, so I was!"

With a grating curse the Roundhead flung him aside, then rushed into the hacienda, ceasing not in his search until satisfied that the loved one was not within those gloomy walls. And as he was forced to this conclusion, his wild agitation abruptly vanished.

He found Juanita Sandoval, still alive, still malicious, still able to triumph over him in his grief, fast bound and under guard of two cowboys. He waved them aside, grasping the Wild Hog by an arm and dragging her out of the building as though she was but a bundle of straw. He dropped her beside the bench to which his wife was still chained, and as he did so, a small bunch of keys fell to his feet.

With these he quickly set his wife at liberty, then listened to her tearful account of how the Wild Hog had torn her from Faith.

"Where is my child, Juanita Sandoval?" he sternly demanded.

"Do you mean *your son*—my Pablo, John?" mocked the woman, her spirit still unshaken, her lust for revenge still predominant.

John Cromwell turned from her, and questioned the old woman who had served as nurse to Faith after the separation; but once more he was defeated. If Paquita knew, she dared not confess, and all questioning failed to bring the desired answer.

"Where is the bonny bride, John?" shrilly laughed the Wild Hog. "Where is the blushing beauty—the pride of your heart? You *had* a heart once, John, for you swore it lay at my dainty little feet when you begged with tears in your eyes—*real* tears, John! Weep some more, dear love! Weep—ay!" with sudden passion breaking through her hideous mockery. "You shall weep tears of blood long and oft before you discover the fate of your dainty daughter, John Cromwell!"

Then the enforced coldness gave way, and in thundering tones the Roundhead bade his men complete their work.

"Fire the den, men! Send it up in ruins as this devil in human guise sent up my home! And you, worse than devil!" turning to where Juanita Sandoval lay bound at his feet, one hand closing on her skinny throat and lifting

her face to a level with his passion-convulsed countenance. "Tell me where you have hidden my daughter, or by all the crimes of which you have been guilty, I'll cast you into the flames of your own den, and laugh aloud as I watch you roast alive!"

And Juanita Sandoval only laughed in his face!

Choking, gurgling, but still a laugh of vicious defiance!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RATTLEPLATE ROB INTERPOSES.

The thoroughly excited cowboys needed no second prompting to make clean work of the business, for their appetites had only been whetted by the brief, feeble resistance offered them, by no means satisfied.

No sooner had the words left the lips of the Roundhead, than they rushed with wild yells and savage laughter into the hacienda, bent on utter destruction.

One of their number almost immediately fell upon a barrel of oil and several casks of strong liquor, and at his yell of exultation his fellows flocked around him. They knocked the casks open, flooding the rooms with the inflammable stuff, then applied the torch, fleeing for their lives to the outer air.

Only for this their work would have been far more difficult, if not altogether in vain, for with earthen floors and walls of adobe, there was scanty material for fire to take hold of at first. But almost immediately the red flames began to shoot out at doors, windows, through the stairway which led to the flat roof, casting a lurid glow over all surrounding objects, and painting the sky with vivid colors.

The Roundhead relaxed his grasp on Juanita's throat as he saw her eyes protruding. He did not mean to kill her thus.

"Tell me, ye demon!" he grated, viciously, glaring into her purpled face with glowing eyes that outshone the reflection cast over his livid face by those roaring flames. "Tell me where my daughter is, or by all that's evil, I'll cast you into that sea of flame with my own hands!"

The Wild Hog gasped for breath, still with that venomous exultation imprinted upon her face. Twice she essayed to speak, but vainly. That terrible grip had nearly silenced her tongue forever.

In his mad frenzy the Roundhead mistook this for malicious mockery, and with his eyes ablaze he caught the woman by the shoulders, lifting her clear of the ground, taking a step toward the raring fire as though about to put his frightful threat into execution.

That mighty grip seemed to break the spell which bound the tongue of the Wild Hog, and she hoarsely panted:

"Lower me—I'll tell!"

Instantly a change came over the madman. He placed the woman on her own feet, supporting her trembling figure with a strong hand, gazing into her convulsed face with almost pitiful eagerness.

"Tell me—show me—and I'll forgive you everything else!"

Better if he had not yielded so far—better have held his tongue than suffered Juanita Sandoval to see how terribly the loss of his child was affecting him! For her malice gained the upper hand once more, and she cried in vicious exultation:

"Yonder, John Cromwell! Yonder in that sea of fire! I locked her in a cell underneath that blazing building!"

The Roundhead staggered back with a choking cry of horror, then as quickly recovered himself, leaping upon the laughing tigress to—

See Juanita Sandoval thrust quickly aside, and the athletic figure of Rattleplate Rob step between them, his handsome face showing strong excitement as he hurriedly muttered:

"Let her lie—let her poison her tongue as she likes for a little longer, John Cromwell! Come with me. I have something to show you. Come—you must come! And at once, do you hear?"

There was something in that face, in those tones, that caused the half-crazed Roundhead to yield without a word of objection or query.

"Look to the women, Fitzpatrick, will you?" Rattleplate Rob cast over his shoulder as he moved away toward the not distant chaparral, one hand clasping the shivering arm of the Roundhead, as though to guard against an escape on his part.

But this precaution was unnecessary, as it proved. Like a man in a dream, the Roundhead followed his conductor into the thicket, to a little opening, where the beams of the full moon fell softly over two figures, one erect, the other lying on the ground, groaning feebly, in pain.

"Look!" muttered Rattleplate, stooping and turning the face so the moonlight fell across it. "Do you know this man, John Cromwell?"

For a moment the Roundhead stood like one dazed, brushing a trembling hand across his eyes as though unwilling to trust their evidence. Then, with a hoarse, strained cry he would have flung himself upon the groaning wretch, only for the cat-like quickness of Knight Latchford, who deftly caught his arms, twisting them be-

hind his back, holding him helpless, while Rattleplate Rob rose to add his strength, if necessary.

"It's Paul Joyce!" panted the Roundhead, struggling vainly to free himself. "Let me at him! I'll tear his vile—"

"He's dying, John Cromwell, and that ought to be enough even for your hatred," sharply interposed the young ranger. "Promise that you will not lift a finger against him before I have explained everything, or I'll have to defend him with my own life! Which is it, Mr. Cromwell?"

"Dying—who dared to forestall my vengeance?"

"His own hand, though the shot was intended for another," quietly replied Rattleplate. "He was trying to carry off a woman—"

"My daughter—my poor little girl!" gasped the Roundhead, his strength seeming to desert him on the instant. "Where is she?"

"Ask him, and he may be able to tell you, if you are not too rough."

At a sign Latchford released the man, and John Cromwell dropped on his knees at the side of the moaning wretch, repeating his question.

"Where is my daughter, Paul Joyce? As you hope for mercy, show mercy to me now!" he faltered, in strangely weak and shaking tones for the man who had ever been so cold, so hard, so stern and unbending.

That faint, plaintive moaning ceased, and the wounded man partly lifted his head, his sunken eyes meeting that anxious, imploring look with what seemed recognition. But then, faint, indistinct, came the words:

"Mother—all lost! Mother—where are you?"

"He seems to have forgotten all else but that one point," muttered Rattleplate Rob, gravely. "Do you know who it is he calls mother?"

But the Roundhead paid no attention to his question, bending lower over the wounded man, hoarsely demanding:

"If I bring your mother, will you talk? If I bring her to your side, will you show me where I can find my poor little girl, Paul?"

"Mother—tell all!"

"Watch over him!" cried the Roundhead, springing to his feet with something of his old decision. "Keep him alive until I can come!"

"You stay here, and I'll bring his mother. He means the Wild Hog?"

"Yes—be quick! He must speak out, or—"

But Rattleplate Rob was off like a shot, without waiting for the conclusion of that savage menace.

In vain did John Cromwell strive to learn what he most wished to hear from those lips during that brief interval before the return of Rattleplate Rob, leading Juanita Sandoval, followed by Jerry Fits escorting Mrs. Cromwell, the majority of the cowboys bringing up the rear.

For reasons which he kept closely to himself, the young ranger desired as many witnesses present as could conveniently be accommodated by that little glade.

He had taken the precaution to search the Wild Hog for concealed weapons before setting her limbs at liberty, and even yet he kept within easy reach of the woman, knowing not what insane fury might lead her to attempt when she learned the whole truth.

In silence he led her to the side of the wounded man, saying:

"He called for you, ma'am. I reckon you've got the best right to what's left of the gentleman!"

For a single breath Juanita Sandoval stood as though petrified, gazing at that prostrate figure, but then, as recognition came, she gave a harsh, choking cry and fell upon her knees, lifting his head in her arms, pressing passionate kisses upon his cold lips.

Javelina Juan, sin-hardened, crime-stained, red-handed, a monster of evil as her many atrocious deeds had stamped her, there was one tender spot in her character: love for the being whom she had brought into this world, to train in crime and wrong-doing.

"My son—my noble boy!" she sobbed, forgetful of all else in her maternal agony, seeing only her dying child in that moment. "Speak to me, precious! My gallant Pablo—it is your mother who calls unto thee! It is thy mother whose kisses woo thee back to life—back from the grave! Pablo—my son, my heart of hearts!"

The Roundhead would have interposed, but Rattleplate Rob motioned him back. The time was not yet come.

"Mother—it is over—played out!" came gaspingly from those lips, and a violent shiver crept through his frame.

Juanita Sandoval uttered a shrill shriek as she felt his muscles relax, and a single glance into his bloodmarked face told her the awful truth. The game was indeed played out for Pablo Sandoval!

With a hoarse, desperate cry the Roundhead strode forward, grasping her shoulder as he gasped:

"He promised to tell—my poor little girl!"

Juanita Sandoval stared full into his face, then her anguish gave way to bitterest hatred as she pointed to the dead face on her lap:

"Your child? Here he lies, John Cromwell! Dead—murdered by you—murdered by his father's own hand!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST FEATHER.

ROB gave a startled ejaculation, and dropped on his knees at the other side of the supposed corpse, one hand feeling of its pulse, his ear pressed lightly over his heart.

Javelina drew back her hand as though to smite the one who dared lay sacrilegious touch on her dead, but the blow was never dealt.

"Water—whisky, some o' you!" cried Rattlebate, sharply. "The fellow's alive, and may be made to talk after all."

He took the first flask that came to his hand, pulling down the chin of the wounded man, and dropping a little of the whisky on his tongue. The effect was slow, but, ere many minutes passed, Pablo Sandoval gave unmistakable signs of returning consciousness.

While he was thus engaged Rob made a signal, for which Knight Latchford seemed to be watching. The detective hurriedly muttered into the ear of Jerry Fits:

"Go take a good square look into that face, and see if you can swear to his identity, please."

"Sure, I know him better nor I do me own moog whin I shave meself in the glash, man dear," declared the owner of the Shamrock.

But Latchford was not waiting to hear this, and as a mere matter of form Jerry Fits complied, followed one after another by his neighbors, until all of the Texans had inspected that haggard, death-marked countenance.

When this was done Rattlebate rose to his feet, leaving Pablo to the care of his mother, drawing to the side of the Roundhead.

John Cromwell did not appear conscious of the mistake into which even the mother of the wounded man had fallen. The utter destruction of his hopes had crushed him far more than the fierce denunciation of the Wild Hog. He sat on the ground, his head bowed, his form shivering as though palsied, his silently weeping wife kneeling at his side, her thin hands trying to soothe and comfort the once strong, hard man.

As he saw this utter abandonment, Rob Randall at once relented, altering his programme a little. Gliding away into the thicket, he soon returned with a light figure on his arm.

"Mother—father!"

John Cromwell sprung to his feet at that trembling call, and, as he did so, Faith leaped into his arms, crying, laughing in one breath.

And Rattlebate, with gentle force, drew Mrs. Cromwell to them, pushing her into that close embrace, laughing until the tears stood in his own eyes.

"'Tisn't just according to Hoyle, but I couldn't stand it any longer, neighbors," he laughed, as Jerry Fits and others came up, attracted by the choking cry which broke from the lips of the Roundhead as he felt that this was no empty vision—as he realized that the lost was found, the dead restored to life again.

"There's no time to lose, Robert," warily whispered Latchford, nudging the young ranger's elbow as he hurried up. "The fellow is dead sure to croak after all. Best crowd matters, Robert!"

"One word apart, gentlemen," hastily uttered Randall, his face and tones both growing unusually grave for him. "You all have taken a square look at yonder poor devil. Can any of you swear to his real name and identity?"

"What's the mattier wid Paul Joyce?" bluntly demanded Jerry Fits.

"Do you recognize in him the master of the Pea Jay Ranch, McFarland?" persisted Rattlebate, singling out the gaunt Scotchman.

There was no answer in words, but the foreman turned away, his head bowed, his whole person significant of deep sorrow for the erring.

There was a chorus of one prolonged note from the remainder of the party; all knew the dying man to be Paul Joyce, master of the Pea Jay Ranch!

"Then will you be so kind as to explain who this gentleman is?" laughed Rob, as Paul Joyce himself walked into their midst, pale and haggard, but with a faint smile of mingled amusement and scorn curling his lips and flashing from his dark eyes.

"I thank you, one and all, gentlemen, for your kindly words and very flattering opinion of myself!" he sarcastically uttered. "It is not every day that a fellow can draw forth such thoroughly frank remarks, and it will be a long, long time before I forget this occasion!"

Knight Latchford gripped his arm, frowning darkly as he muttered:

"Leave speechmaking until later, man! We want a clean job of this, now it's gone so far. If the fellow croaks before—"

Rattlebate was the first to regain the side of the wounded outlaw, and even he was amazed to find him so much stronger. His head turned at that quick footprint, and a look of terror came into his sunken eyes as he huskily gasped:

"Not yet—spare me! Let me die—naturally for—mother!"

Instantly the young ranger caught at the opportunity, and his tone was far more harsh than it otherwise would have been:

"If I hold the lynchers back, will you make a clean breast of it?"

"He lies, my son!" fiercely muttered the Wild Hog, a flash of her old spirit breaking through the mute grief which had fallen upon her. "They are pitiless—they know not the word mercy! We must die—we will die with locked jaws, my Pablo!"

"To the devil with—I'll tell all if—only spare me!" gasped the thoroughly cowed rascal, turning from his mother and thinking only of saving his own pitiful life.

Rattlebate lifted his hand, and the Texans gathered about. Paul Joyce came through their lines, and stood squarely before the shrinking eyes of the wounded villain.

"Who am I, you cur?" he sternly demanded. "When did your evil gang capture me, and where? Tell the whole truth, or hang like a sheep-killing cur!"

Sandoval turned his haggard eyes upon his mother's face, faintly muttering:

"Confess—tell all, or take—curse forever!"

That was the last feather! The Wild Hog could have faced her foes defiantly unto the last gasp, but she loved this handsome son of hers. And now that he threatened to curse her if she refused to clear up the snares she had woven so patiently—all for him!—her last defense was broken down, and she seemed like one who had received a deathblow.

It would consume too much time and space to literally follow her confession, and a brief synopsis must suffice.

Though the two men were so strangely alike in face, figure and even voice, there was no degree of kinship existing between Paul Joyce and Pablo Sandoval. This startling resemblance was first detected by the woman, Javelina Juan, while laying her plans of vengeance on the Roundhead, and from that chance discovery sprung all which has afforded material for this record of wild life.

In disguise Pablo Sandoval studied the lay of the ground. He saw that his "double" was deeply in love with the daughter of the man whom his mother had taught him to so bitterly hate, and he managed to see Faith Cromwell—to see her, and to fall madly in love with her.

It was this mad passion which led to the rest. That made them plot for more than simple revenge. That determined Pablo Sandoval to step into the shoes of Paul Joyce—to steal his ranch and stock as well as his identity and his bride!

Paul Joyce did visit San Antonio, and, warned by his spies, Pablo Sandoval effected his capture while on his way back to the Pea Jay, taking him across the Rio Grande into Mexico, to the half-ruined hacienda. Then the long meditated blow was struck at the Roundhead.

It was Paul Joyce whom the slaves of the Wild Hog flogged so pitilessly under the distracted eyes of Faith Cromwell. Then he was removed to another room, and Pablo Sandoval took his place during that interview with the maiden, and whispered to her hopes of escape. It was Pablo who led Faith through the hacienda where all were simulating a drugged sleep, and Pablo who was attacked just as they reached the horses prepared for their flight into Texas.

And it was Paul Joyce who helped capture the cunning criminal, just as perfect success seemed about to reward his vile scheming!

"That was part of my work, gentlemen," laughed Rattlebate, keeping an eye on his own precious hopes, shooting a side glance to be certain Jerry Fits was listening closely. "It's a thankless task to blow one's own horn, but if nobody else volunteers to do the tooting, must a fellow hold his hush, credit or no credit?"

"May I ask a personal favor of you, friends?" came the subdued tones of John Cromwell at this juncture.

"Av coarse ye may, Crum'll!" spluttered Jerry, glad of the chance to explode without doing himself actual injury—and he knew that each moment of repression added mightily to his peril! "Sure, I'll b'ate the outsides in av the foorst wan to dare say ye nay to that, now!"

"I ask—I humbly beg of you to spare the lives of this man and this woman, neighbors," huskily added the Roundhead, motioning toward Juanita and Pablo. "If they have sinned, so have they been sinned against. Spare them—for my sake!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE RATTLEPATE SETTLES DOWN.

THERE was not a single dissenting voice. Even Juanita Sandoval kept silence, though, if her spirit had not been so entirely crushed by the cruel threats of her own son—the son for whom the greatest and blackest of her crimes had been committed—she must have burst out in fierce rejection of mercy, coming through the intercession of John Cromwell.

And thus—kneeling by the side of her sorely wounded son, not knowing whether he would recover or die—the Texans turned away and left the woman River Raider.

Now that the first burst of excitement had passed, all were growing anxious to leave that spot, knowing full well the red glow of the hacienda would surely arouse curiosity and attract many to the scene. Knowing, too, that all who came would naturally be enemies; and now their

main object having been attained, the Texans were only too willing to mount and ride swiftly away.

As yet Paul Joyce had not spoken to John Cromwell, though a loving look from Faith told him she had explained his part in that night's events. He was content to bide his time, knowing as he did that even the grim old Roundhead could no longer hold him under the ban.

"Grim old Roundhead?"

No longer that! Though even himself was not aware of the great change which that night had wrought, John Cromwell was never again so cold, so stern, so austere. That hour of awful agony, when he believed his idolized child was forever lost to him, had done its work well!

Not until the spot where Tom Dobler had been left in bonds, was gained, and the rejoicing spy set free from his bonds, did John Cromwell fairly face the young master of the Pea Jay Ranch.

Then, with a hand that trembled visibly as he held it out, he said:

"Let the past be dead, Paul. Faith has told me how you saved her from a fate ten thousand times worse than death! Not now—I'm too badly shaken—when we are in God's country again."

"Will you listen to *that*, now?" ejaculated Rattlebate in mock anger as his keen ears caught those earnest words. "Wasn't *I* there or thereabouts? Did *he* do all the saving? Didn't *I* yank *him* out o' the grip o' those two rascals just as they were about to butcher him? And didn't *I* save the little lady my own self?"

"Simmer down, Robert!" placidly enjoined Latchford. "Time enough to straddle your high horse when you get within range of *other* eyes!"

But, though the company rode hard and steadily toward the Rio Grande, the young ranger was compelled to tell his story, and none listened more eagerly than honest Jerry Fits: a fact which particularly pleased our young friend, as a matter of course!

It will be remembered that Knight Latchford called the attention of his partner to the sudden appearance of several dark figures, just leaving the hacienda, and making their way toward the chaparral. And it must not be forgotten that Randall bade his mate follow him quickly, to kill or capture the trio, in hopes of learning definitely whether or no the Wild Hog was in her den, and if she held the two women captive in that building.

Luckily the two adventurers had only a few rods to cover before reaching a point which enabled them to lie in wait for the enemy, and by another stroke of good fortune, they caught sufficient from the talk of two of the trio, to understand the strange truth.

Having made what use she required of Paul Joyce, the Wild Hog sent him out to his death, ordering her men to kill him and bury his body securely in the thicket where it could never give her or her son more trouble. The knaves fully intended to carry out their instructions, but instead, they walked blindly to their own death.

Silently singling out their victims, the two scouts leaped upon them, and almost without a groan, the two outlaws sunk down in death.

Paul Joyce was quickly set at liberty and his tongue given back the power of speech. And as he hastily explained what had happened to the thoroughly astounded rescuers, for the first time they realized how completely the face and voice of Pablo Sandoval had deceived them.

Paul Joyce was fiercely eager to attack the hacienda, vowing that he would rather die than leave the maiden another minute in the power of those vile schemers, but before they could arrive at any definite conclusion, they were startled by the sight of another little party of three leaving the hacienda, striking for the chaparral, only a few rods to one side of where the two Wild Hogs had met their death!

Almost instantly they recognized a woman among the trio, and hurrying to cut them off, they met Pablo Sandoval, Tio Tomas and Faith Cromwell, just as the party were about to mount their horses to flee from Mexico.

Latchford sprung upon the man whom he now knew to be the real assassin of his nephew, and in the struggle which ensued, Pablo was shot by his own pistol as both fell to the ground together.

And then came the fierce sounds of the Roundhead's attack on the den of the Wild Hog.

Latchford knew that Pablo was mortally wounded, and so made no effort to do more than extort from him a full confession of the murder, doing this while Paul Joyce was soothing Faith, and Rattlebate was going to fetch the Roundhead to make him realize how deeply they had all wronged the young master of the Pea Jay Ranch.

So busily was Rob engaged in telling his story that he failed to notice the sudden vanishment of Knight Latchford. Nor had any one of the party missed him before the dawn of day, when they were only a few miles from the Rio Grande.

It was too late then to think of sending out a search party, and after a brief period of waiting, hoping against hope that the detective had only halted for a few minutes, on purpose, they rode on, pressing their tired steeds hard, for right well

they knew that safety only lay on the northern shore of the great river.

The trip was completed without interruption or sight of the enemy, and then, going into camp on the same spot where they had passed so many long hours of weary, heart-crushing waiting, the company settled down to enjoy a much needed rest.

They spent an entire day and night at this point, and were just preparing to resume their journey when Latchford rode up to the ford, his horse barely able to carry him into the midst of his friends. His face was haggard, his eyes heavy and hollow from long deprivation of rest and sleep, but his voice was cool and easy as he returned their greeting, and he soon after whispered to Randall:

"He's dead, and my hunt is at an end. I saw him die in her arms. I watched him buried. Then I came on after you."

And Molly Fits?

Even when Rob Randall led Faith Cromwell up to her, drawing back as the two girls clasped each other in their arms, the perverse Molly tried to evade the young fellow who had so gallantly kept his vow, and probably would have led him still on another rare chase, only for honest Jerry, who pounced upon her with:

"Molly, ye conthrairy litttle devil ye! Coom out o' that, now!"

He literally forced the blushing, pouting girl into Rattlepate's willing arms, holding them tightly in his own fat arms as he added:

"Hang to her, me b'ye! Sthick fasht, av ye ain't toired av ye're barg'in alriddly, me son! An' ye, Molly, the pesht av me loife! Quite yer bequittin' an' throy to behave av ye don't want Jerry Fits to pick out a man for ye! Begob, av I do *that*, now, it's hoontin' up the weentiest, m'nest, scrubbiest scrub in all Tixis I'll be after doin'—will Jerry Fits, now, d'ye moind that, ye conthrairy litttle devil, ye?"

"If I must—Rob?" murmured Molly, blushing most divinely as her gray-blue eyes lifted to meet his loving glow, yielding most deliciously when she saw that further coquetry was denied her.

"Molly—my angel!"

"Will ye lishten to that now!" gasped Jerry, holding up his fat hands in comical horror, then clapping them over his ears and waddling away in hot haste.

And I reckon we'd better follow his example, reader mine!

Molly never regretted her submission, and she has had ample time since that double wedding-day—

Why, of course!

Paul Joyce and Faith Cromwell were married at the same time, and John Cromwell—no longer "the grim old Roundhead," though!—insisted on their living with him and the mother, turning the two ranches into one, all under the management of honest Aus. McFarland.

Anything else?

Yes: Knight Latchford left Texas after the wedding, sending back word that the rascal whom he and Rattlepate Rob dispatched down the Rio Grande on two logs, had been rescued when almost at the Gulf!

THE END.

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